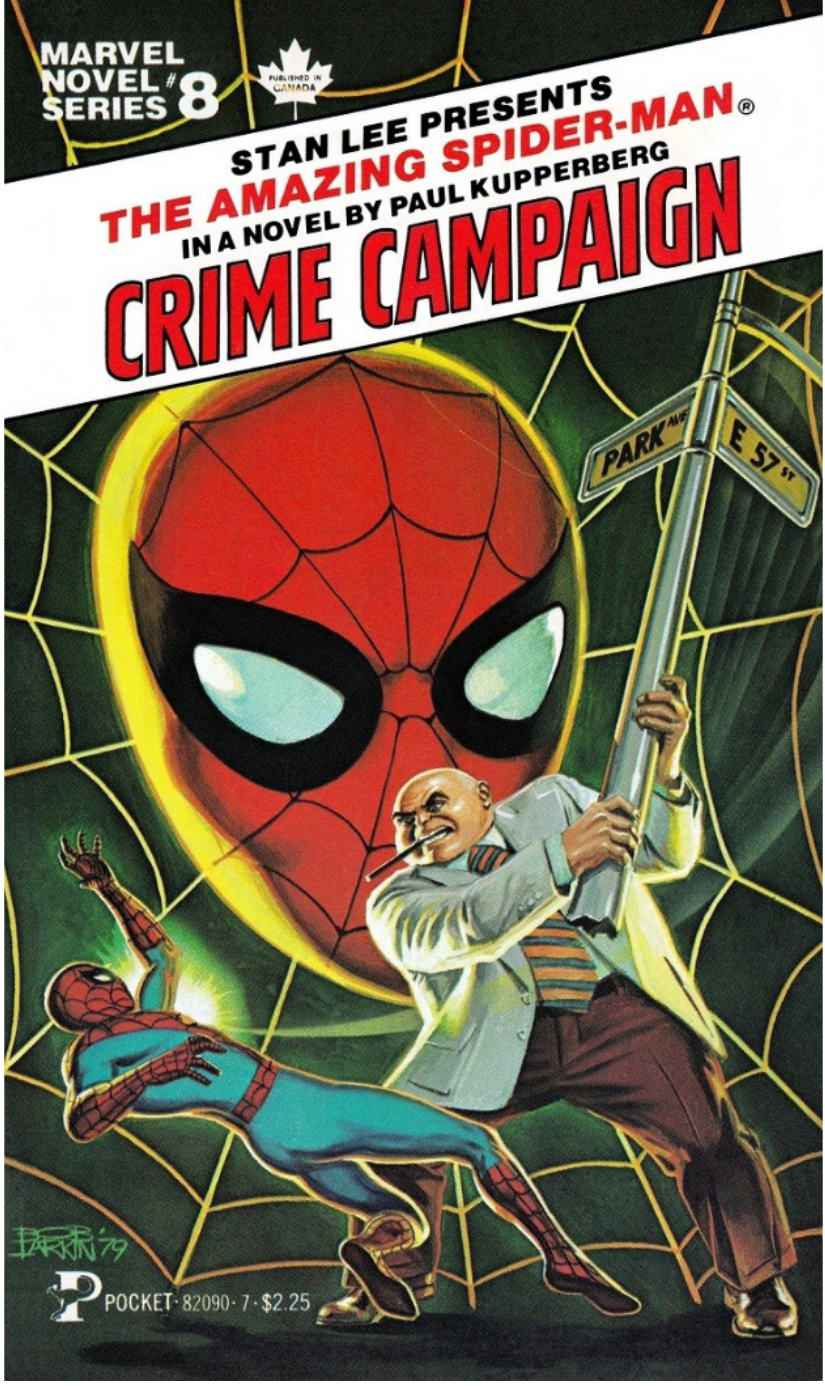
MARVEL NOVEL SERIES #8
PUBLISHED IN CANADA
STAN LEE PRESENTS
THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN®
IN A NOVEL BY PAUL KUPPERBERG
CRIME CAMPAIGN
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DARKIN '79
POCKET · 82090 · 7 · $2.25

CITY UNDER SIEGE!

His name is Ian Forester. He is America's foremost newscaster, the most trusted man in this country. Now he is running for Mayor of New York City, and he is certain to win.

So why is he so worried?

Is it because he is being controlled against his will by the man they call **THE KINGPIN?** The man who controls New York's Underworld, who rules a nest of vipers with the power of his massive fists!

Is it because he knows the Kingpin is ultimately planning to destroy New York City?

Or is it because the only one who can save him is

the AMAZING
SPIDER-MAN

who is himself being hunted—for a crime he did not commit!

CRIME CAMPAIGN

THE WEB-SLINGER'S LATEST AND GREATEST NOVEL!

“YOU MISERABLE INSECT,”
KINGPIN ROARED.

Spider-Man rushed forward, his arms outstretched before him to grab the Kingpin’s lapels, but the big man, his reflexes unclouded by any substance, was faster. He grasped Spider-Man by the wrists, and Spidey yapped in pain as he felt the Kingpin’s powerful hold.

Throwing his weight back, Spider-Man propelled the fat man over his head with his feet. The floor of the restaurant fairly shuddered as more than a quarter of a ton of flesh and bone slammed to the ground.

“The bigger they are, hey, fats?”

Got to keep him angry so he doesn’t get a chance to plan any strategy. In my condition, I doubt if I could take Bozo the Clown, let alone New York Fats!

Spider-Man was correct. The Kingpin of New York crime was far too angered by this attack to bother forming any battle plans. He didn’t have to. Not when he could simply lumber forward, grasp Spider-Man by neck and crotch, lift him like a rag doll over his head, and heave him through a plate-glass window, hundreds of feet above the concrete pavement of New York . . .

CRIME CAMPAIGN

BY

PAUL KUPPERBERG

Packaged and edited by
Len Wein and Marv Wolfman

A KANGAROO BOOK
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

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P.V.S EBOOK

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FOR MOM AND DAD
WHO LET US BE OURSELVES

One

The trick, Bunky, is not to let life's little disappointments get you down . . .

. . . and if you buy that one, then I've got a couple of acres of swampland in Jersey you'd probably be interested in, too!

That rather sardonic thought was on the mind of the youth called Spider-Man as he arced gracefully through the air on a thin strand of webbing high over the congested streets of Manhattan. His dark blue-and-red-clad legs pumped out before him with smooth, practiced ease as he propelled his swinging body to the roof of the building on the corner of Ninth Avenue and Thirty-fifth Street.

Spider-Man stood at the edge of the roof and stared unseeing into the darkening streets thirty stories below. He perched precariously on the decaying masonry and heaved a weary sigh into the warm spring air.

Ah, what'd you expect Wall-crawler? I spend six-fifths of my time running after bad guys for a somewhat less than appreciative public and police department and I'm probably getting exactly what I deserve in return.

Nothing!

I hardly have enough spare time to indulge in life's little luxuries . . . like eating, sleeping—breathing! So why should I expect Mary Jane Watson or Betty Brant to indulge me in my game of cops and robbers, especially when I can't tell them what it is I do for a hobby!

He crouched at the roof's edge and rested his elbows on his knees;

the white orbs that were the eyes of his mask stared unblinking and macabre in the gathering twilight. Spider-Man sighed again and shook his head. *You've been spending an awful lot of time sighing these days, Peter, m'bucko. That's just gotta be a bad sign!*

Spider-Man laughed harshly to himself. *Of course it's a bad sign, dumbo! You're depressed! And who wouldn't be after losing two fantastic chicks in a row, out of terminal stupidity! It's not like I asked for this aggravation, either. I don't remember waking up one morning and saying, "Hey, wouldn't it just be great if I got bitten by a radioactive spider today and had my whole life screwed up by it!"*

The Web-slinger stood, his mouth set in a grim line beneath his mask, and pointed his arms out before him. The middle fingers of his hands curled to touch two small buttons concealed in his palms under his gloves. With a low "twipping" sound, twin strands of a unique, unbreakable chemical webbing spurted from tiny nozzles secreted at his wrists. The webbing shot unerringly through the night sky and adhered securely to the cornice of a building farther up Ninth Avenue. Grimacing wearily, Spider-Man leaped out into space.

His legs kicked wildly as the Web-spinner swung himself away from the building. Reaching the apex of his swing, he fired another strand of webbing at another building farther up Ninth, each incredible swing carrying him the length of a city block.

But the Web-slinger's thoughts were not on the delicate acrobatics that made this unique mode of transportation possible for him; he had long ago reached the point where such actions were as natural to him as walking. And even the exhilaration of swinging unencumbered through the air was not sufficient to drive the despair from Spider-Man's mind.

Life may be a bowl of cherries, but I'm the one who's always getting stuck with the pits!

Suddenly, a throbbing pain, like the pulsing of a raw, exposed nerve, flared to life in Spider-Man's head, cutting off *all* thoughts. He swung his body with a concerted effort and made contact with the grimy wall of an old tenement building, clinging to its face by the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands like some giant arachnid as he caught his breath.

Spider-sense, I wish you'd just leave messages with my answering service like everybody else!

The telltale tingling in Spider-Man's head was his unique spider-sense, a personal early warning system that signaled whenever danger was nearby or imminent. Thus, even before the muted echo of gunshots and the distant scream of sirens reached his ears, the brightly clad youth was swinging hurriedly to the scene of the trouble.

Tockman's Sporting Emporium on Tenth Avenue and Twenty-ninth Street was that scene.

In the early evening, this street was normally filled with thousands of workers as they hurried to the security of home, hearth, and Walter Cronkite after a day of loud-mouthed bosses and hassles too numerous to mention. This evening, however, Tenth Avenue between Twenty-ninth and Thirtieth streets was an armed camp, blocked at either intersection by N.Y.P.D. barricades. In the middle of this tiny oasis, a dozen police cars were standing, their red and white roof lights blinking almost hypnotically on the brick canyon walls of the street. The occupants of those cars, helmeted police officers, were crouched behind them, most with their service revolvers drawn, some anxiously clutching shotguns to their chests. The car's flashing lights were reflected in the officers' gleaming eyes, all of which were fixed on the bullet-ridden plate-glass window of Tockman's.

Either they're filming the new Clint Eastwood flick down there, or there's a peck of trouble brewing in that sporting goods store. And unless my spider-sense has taken up film criticism on the side, I'm betting on the trouble!

Spider-Man clung to the face of the building overlooking Tockman's, keeping himself safely out of view of the police below in the shadows. Tockman's was the lowest structure on the block, surrounded on either side by taller office buildings. As he peered through the gloom, Spider-Man could detect no sign of activity on the peeling tar-paper roof below, and, making sure he stayed in the shadows, he began a swift, gliding crawl down the side of the building.

Suddenly, the calm of the early evening was shattered by the deafening roar of a handgun filling the street below, source of origin: the now shattered plate-glass façade of Tockman's.

Looks like I win.

The police ducked behind their cars, keeping out of range of the shooting but making no move to return fire. A red-faced plainclothesman stuck his head up from behind one of the cars, a crackling bullhorn at his mouth. "HOLD YOUR FIRE, MEN! HOLD YOUR FIRE! REMEMBER, THEY'VE GOT HOSTAGES IN THERE!"

Spidey made a sour face beneath his mask. *Just as I thought. Probably a couple of guys holed up in there . . . with God knows how many hostages! They must've botched a holdup and decided this was better than shooting it out with the cops without a shield.*

And ain't that just a fine nest of spiders! A sporting goods store is stocked with enough guns and ammunition for those guys to hold off the U.S. Marines forever. And do you wanna talk food? They've probably got

enough of the canned and dehydrated variety on hand to last them and the Marines even longer than forever!

The shooting from inside the store stopped as suddenly as it had began, and Spider-Man dropped the last fifteen feet from the wall to the peeling roof below, staying well within the safety of the darkness cast by the taller buildings surrounding him.

Those turkeys could keep this show running longer than Fiddler on the Roof *and the cops can't risk any harm coming to the hostages by rushing in.*

But guess who can get inside and put the bad guys into sleepy-land before the hostages get hurt? Say your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man and win the $100!

Spider-Man landed in a crouch and his eyes narrowed behind the one-way mirror lenses in his mask as he searched the shadows. He was alone on the roof.

Staying low, the Wall-crawler scampered across the tar paper, his booted feet almost gliding across the torn surface. He came to the edge of the darkness and stood there motionless for long moments, eyes and ears ever vigilant for the slightest disturbance in the night. The nearest cover was a good three yards away, a large metal air-conditioning duct that jutted four feet from the tar-paper roof. He crouched even lower and sprang forward, covering the ten feet between shadow and duct in a single, effortless leap.

So far, so good. But you've just got to know my luck isn't going to last.

Spider-Man kept the duct between himself and the street as he dove over the rear edge of the roof . . .

. . . a mere moment before a bullet tore into the surface where he had stood!

He clung by his fingertips to the underside of the roof's ledge and exhaled sharply. *See? What'd I tell me?*

But there was no haven for the Web-slinger behind the two-story building, even though it shielded him from the police-sharpshooters who continued to fire at the roof from the windows of the taller buildings across Tenth Avenue. For, clad in baby-blue crash helmets and bulky, black flak vests, each wielding a .30-06 shotgun, two policemen were advancing on the rear door of Tockman's through a litter-strewn back alley. They started suddenly at the sound of gunfire from above and swung their shotguns and alert gazes upward, settling both on the dangling Spider-Man.

"Hi, guys," he said brightly. "Sorry I didn't get a chance to phone before dropping in on you like this."

The officers stared at Spidey for long seconds before one of them

recovered his voice. "S-*Spider-Man!"*

"Give the man a cee-gar!" Spidey said. *Any second now, one of them is going to remember they've got guns in their . . .*

As if they had read his thoughts, the second officer brought his shotgun to his shoulder. "Get him, Campollo! Don'tcha know there's a whole fistful of warrants out on this guy?"

The harsh roar of the shotgun filled the night.

But Spider-Man had taken full advantage of the second's hesitation and had swung his legs straight up over his head in a backward somersault, landing on the roll back on the roof. Some enterprising cop had thought to shine a searchlight on the roof from across the street, however, and Spider-Man landed in a flood of light with no shadows to hide in.

High-caliber bullets tore up the tar paper behind him as Spider-Man leaped and rolled across the roof, his zigzag pattern creating an almost impossible target for the sharpshooters several hundred yards away. Then, with a powerful leap, he was above the circle of light, climbing with amazing speed straight up the adjoining wall.

Whew! If it's my breath or something, I wish they'd just send me an anonymous letter or a bottle of Scope instead.

Eugene Bormann stood hunched over behind the remains of the plate-glass front of Tockman's, a .45 Magnum clutched in his trembling, sweaty hand. He had stood thusly for the better part of a half-hour, his wide, frightened eyes darting over the assemblage of blue coats in the street. The gunfire on the roof moments ago had sent his already taut nerves near to the breaking point.

Bormann was shielded from the street by a bullet-torn manikin modeling a bright red goosedown coat. The interior of Tockman's was dark, the aisles of sporting equipment and clothing shrouded in deep gloom. From the street, the inside of the store looked like a shapeless mass of dark shadowy figures.

"Bormann!"

The word was called from the darkened rear, of the store where Bormann's partner kept their four hostages at gunpoint. The fierce whisper made Bormann jump as he whirled with the Magnum thrust out before him, almost slipping out of his sweaty palm.

"Put it down, stupid! You wanna blow my head off with that thing?" Jim Strickland walked casually down an aisle toward his partner in crime, a high-powered hunting rifle slung loosely over his shoulder. His hard, cruel face was set in a malevolent grin toward the cowering man by the window.

"I-I'm sorry, Jim," Bormann stuttered. "I'm just a little uptight is all. I'll be all right." Strickland continued to grin at his partner, the spinning lights from outside glinting in his dark, evil eyes. "H-honest!" Bormann added hurriedly.

"Yeah, Gene. You *better* be okay, buddy-boy, because any time now, we may be up to our eyeballs in a shootout . . ." Strickland whipped the rifle off his shoulder and pointed it menacingly at Bormann. "And you better not let me down! *Comprendé?"*

Bormann nodded convulsively, his bulging eyes staring into the black barrel inches from his face.

Strickland turned his head casually as he heard the short, hesitant footsteps of a woman in high heels behind him. "What d'ya want *now,* lady?" he sighed wearily.

Ann DeLarye stopped beside a display of running shoes, her hands nervously shredding an already partially demolished Kleenex. An hour earlier, she had stopped in at Tockman's on her way home from school to pick up a pair of those shoes for school. Now she was frightened to death, didn't know if she'd ever get those all-important running shoes.

Strickland grinned at the pale, shiny face with obvious pleasure. It was evident that he was a man who liked to hold the upper hand in every situation—especially when that hand clutched a hunting rifle. "I said, what d'ya want?"

Ann put her hand to her throat. "P-please, the old man . . . the owner . . . he's getting worse! His heart, I-I think. You've got to let him . . ."

Bormann rushed forward, his gun thrust out at the frightened girl's head. *"Shut up, dammit!* Get back there with the rest of 'em and just shut up!" he screamed.

Whimpering, Ann DeLarye pulled back, her vision clouded by tears. They were both crazy, she thought. *Nobody* was ever going to leave this place alive . . . not the crooks and not the hostages. And certainly not Chaim Tockman, aged seventy-three, who lay in the rear of the store to which he had dedicated a third of his life; his heart was attacking him.

Fifty-six-year-old Nettie Baum comforted the old man, holding his red, clammy face in her ample lap, listening in utter helplessness to his labored breathing. Her nine-year-old grandson, Howard, knelt on the floor beside his grandmother, frightened and holding onto her skirt with both hands. Nettie looked up hopefully as Ann sank wearily to the floor beside her, her hands unable to stop trembling.

"Nu?"

Ann shook her head. "They're not going to let Mr. Tockman go, Mrs.

Baum. They're not going to let any of us . . ." Ann stopped suddenly, looking quietly at the boy. But he had not heard her. He was watching in fear as Strickland and Bormann walked toward the hostages.

"Comfy, folks?" Strickland chuckled.

"Listen to me, you men," Nettie Baum said angrily. "This man is sick. You just can't let him lie here and die!"

Strickland smiled evilly. "Why the hell not, lady? It just gives him a head start on the rest of you!"

The spotlight that shone on the roof of Tockman's winked out, the officers manning it convinced that the object of their search had long since fled under a fusillade of bullets.

Beneath his mask Spider-Man smiled.

Once again, he scampered down the sheer brick face and dropped to the now dark roof of the squat building. In seconds, he had retraced his earlier route across the tattered tar paper and stood by the large air-conditioning duct. He looked about once and then quite effortlessly ripped the metal grille from the top of the duct.

He hoisted himself up and into the duct and slid several feet down, dragging the metal grille back into place above him. *Why give some nosy cop something to trip over and worry about?*

Spider-Man had to lift his arms straight up over his head in order to negotiate the tight fit of the narrow, vertical shaft, but, with a bit of wiggling, the Wall-crawler was able to slide slowly down the duct until he came to a grille that looked out into an empty, second-floor room. Spider-Man maneuvered his body in the narrow confines of the duct until he could brace his feet against the grille. Powerful muscles bunched as he pushed against the covering with his legs, forcing the metal grille loose from the wall with a minimum of sound. With a final shove, the grille came loose and hung against the wall by a single screw.

There was nothing in the room but dust, and, before he could stifle it, Spider-Man sneezed loudly. *I wonder if any of the other heroes in town have to worry about their allergies.*

On the first floor directly beneath where Spidey stood, Bormann heard the sneeze and a look of panic crossed his face. *"Jim!* Hey, man, th-there's a *cop* up there!"

"Yeah?" Strickland pulled back the bolt on his rifle, feeding a shell into the breech. "Let's see how long he *stays* up there." Without bothering to take aim, he pointed the barrel of the gun at the ceiling over his head and squeezed the trigger three times in rapid succession, plugging large holes in the plaster overhead.

The telltale tingling of his spider-sense came to life once again in

Spider-Man's skull and, without thought, he threw himself headlong across the dusty floor just seconds before the three high-caliber shells erupted through the floorboards. *Thank you kindly, spider-sense. Well, I guess there's no sense playing hide-and-seek up here any longer, so . . .*

He crouched, pulling his balled-up fists back and then driving them through the floorboards.

. . . I might as well get down there and make like the cavalry!

The apparent explosion of the ceiling over their heads caused Bormann, Strickland, and the four hostages to cover their heads with their arms for protection from the shower of plaster.

"W-what is it, man? What *happened,* Jim?"

Jim Strickland didn't answer. Rather, he stared in disbelief at the man in the crimson and blue costume who stood with arms akimbo upside down next to a large hole in the ceiling. Spread across the red portion of this bizarre garb was a frightening black spiderweb pattern. His eyes seemed to be huge, white orbs.

"You're wasting your time asking your friend, friend," Spider-Man said. "Ask me. I caused it, y'know."

Bormann struggled to his feet as panic gripped him in the face of this . . . man. He brought his gun up and aimed it unsteadily at the upside-down man's head. The Web-slinger chuckled beneath his mask and, with lightning-quick speed, snaked his hand out and knocked the Magnum to the floor. Then he brought his hand back and slapped the trembling criminal across the mouth, sending him flying across the room to crash into a display of stacked cans of tennis balls.

As Strickland watched his dazed partner struggle to his feet amid the toppled pile of tin cans, Spider-Man dropped to the floor, somersaulting in midair to land on his feet next to the huddled-together hostages.

Nettie Baum cowered, hugging Mr. Tockman's head close to her breast as she glanced fearfully at Spider-Man. *My god,* she thought, reaching for her grandson's hand, *these maniacs will kill us all!*

Strickland recovered from his shock quickly and turned on Spider-Man, a low growl beginning deep in his throat. "Let's not get hostile now, pal. I wouldn't want to have to mess up that pretty face of yours," Spidey said. But the hold-up man merely growled louder and swung his rifle into line with the Web-slinger's midriff.

Spider-Man *tsk*-ed under his breath and pointed a hand at the other man's gun. A barely audible *twipp* could be heard and Spidey yanked sharply toward himself. The rifle, caught by a strand of webbing, flew from Strickland's fingers.

Spider-Man began to whirl when he heard Ann DeLarye gasp behind

him, but that move was cut short as a blinding flash of pain shot through his neck and shoulders. He fell limply to the floor. Eugene Bormann stood over him, holding a baseball bat in his hands. Through the red haze of pain, Spidey saw the nervous crook rushing at him, the bat poised over his head to deliver the final blow.

Abruptly, the Web-slinger pulled back his legs, bent at the knees, and rammed both feet heavily into Bormann's stomach. The man's breath exploded from his lungs and Spidey pushed him aside before springing to his feet.

"Okay, sunshine boys. From now on, *no more Mr. Nice Guy!"*

Strickland tugged frantically at his belt as he groped for the handle of his revolver. He pulled it loose with a loud tearing of cloth and, before the Web-slinger could make a grab for him, began firing wildly.

Spider-Man leaped quickly to one side, the deadly hail of lead riddling the wall behind where he had stood. Strickland looked about him in the gloom of the store, his eyes flashing madly.

"Peek-a-boo!"

The Wall-crawler clung to the far wall of Tockman's Sporting Emporium, his arms and legs spread awkwardly at his sides. "Come on now, Jimmy. How're you ever going to win the giant Kewpie doll if you can't even hit the target?"

Spidey glanced quickly to his side in time to see Bormann rise unsteadily to his feet once again, the glint of fear in his eyes replaced now with an almost maniacal gleam of hate.

"Listen, pal," Spider-Man said, "we're never going to be able to get acquainted if you don't keep still for a few minutes."

His hands came away from the wall and Spider-Man aimed his web-shooter at Bormann, then fired a thick, continuous stream of viscous web-fluid all over the approaching felon. The webbing rapidly enveloped Bormann, pinning his arms to his sides and wrapping tightly about his ankles. With a scream of outrage, Eugene Bormann fell forward, knocking himself cold against the edge of a display case full of switchblades.

Jim Strickland continued to fire his pistol until it was empty, but suddenly his hands no longer seemed to possess their former steadiness and his shots went awry. It was that demon on the wall, that Spider-Man who could be neither shot nor knocked out. It stood like a dark thing of the night against the stark white walls of the store, like . . .

. . . like a creature from hell!

The crook threw his empty gun at the dark shadow on the wall, but it merely slapped the weapon aside and laughed a menacing laugh

that sent a chill of terror up Strickland's spine. "Face it, bozo," it said, its voice muffled and made eerie by the thick material of the mask. "You've just bought the old farm!"

With that, Spider-Man sprang from the wall and threw himself on top of the screaming form of Jim Strickland. His right fist flashed out and caught Strickland on the chin. A low cry of terror was cut short in the crook's throat as his head snapped violently back and he sagged like a deflating balloon to the floor.

"Nighty-night, campfire kids," Spidey chuckled, then set about spinning a chemical cocoon around the unconscious crook. When that was done, he attached a single strand to the rest of his creation and hoisted the man upside down from the ceiling.

"That's the show for this evening, folks," he said, turning to the hostages. "Is everybody okay?"

But none of the hostages responded. Mrs. Baum and Ann lay huddled on the floor, their bodies shielding Mr. Tockman and Howard from stray bullets. It was Nettie Baum, though, who finally mustered the courage to face the masked youth.

"W-what are you going to do to us, Mr. Spider-Man?" Her voice quavered as she spoke.

"Great!"

The word exploded from Spider-Man's lips in genuine anger, further scaring the people on the floor. "This is just great! I risk my neck to save yours, and you're more afraid of *me* than you were of them . . . and they had *guns,* for crying out loud!"

But the Web-slinger's words were not reaching the former captives, and, with a sound of disgust, he turned his back to them and sprang lithely through the hole in the ceiling.

I wonder if Captain America has these problems.

Spider-Man pulled open a musty window upstairs and climbed out, leaping to the wall of the building next to the sporting goods store, then began to climb up its sheer face. *Well, what'd I expect? The way J. Jonah Jameson keeps blasting me every day in the* Daily Bugle, *it's natural everyone should hate me!*

Sometimes I think that's what I'm here for.

Two

Spider-Man dropped nimbly to the grass-covered strip of soil alongside the simple, wooden-framed house he had grown up in in Forest Hills. He crouched in the shadows beside the square of light from the kitchen window and reassured himself that his entrance had gone unnoticed. *I'd hate to have to explain to the lady of this particular house what Spider-Man is doing in her garden!*

Sighing in relief in the cool air, Spidey reached up and pulled off his mask, revealing the youthful features of a weary Peter Parker. He ran his fingers quickly through his tousled brown hair, shoving it back into its customary widow's peak. *Whew! Playing patty-cake with those thugs sure took a lot out of me. I've just got to stop all this worrying and get me some sleep!* Peter reached down and pulled a neatly folded stack of clothes from beneath a nearby bush. In minutes, the strange, frightening figure of Spider-Man was gone, replaced by the casually clad form of Peter Parker.

Peter carefully checked over his appearance before walking around to the front of the house. *Can't have any of the old webbing hanging out of my shirttails in front of Aunt May. That sweet old lady's been like a mother to me . . . Heck, in a way, she was my mother! After all, didn't she raise me like the son she never had after my parents died?* A pained expression crossed Peter's face. *Lord, if she ever found out that her "fragile" nephew was the dreaded Spider-Man, the shock might not only trigger another heart attack, it could kill her!*

Knocking on the door, Peter tried to compose his tired features into something other than the wreck he knew he must look like. When it

came to Peter's health, Aunt May still treated him as she had when he was five years old.

The door opened and Peter smiled broadly at the kindly, wrinkled face that greeted him. "Why, hello, Peter, dear," May Parker said, smiling at her nephew.

Peter feigned shock. "Why, who are *you,* you gorgeous young thing? What've you done with my Aunt May?

Aunt May tittered softly. "Oh, Peter! How you *do* go on!"

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Hey, babe, what say you shove that pot roast of yours in the freezer and you and I step out to a disco and boogie till dawn?"

"You mean like that boy in *Saturday Night Fever,* John Revolta?"

"Er, that's *Tra*volta, Aunt May, although, come to think of it, your way is probably a lot closer to the truth."

May Parker closed the door behind her nephew. "Well, come on in, dear. A friend of yours is waiting to see you in the living room."

Peter looked confused. "A friend? Who . . . ?"

Aunt May smiled. "It's a young lady, Peter."

Peter Parker's heart began thumping like a sledgehammer in his chest. "You mean Mary Jane's here . . . ?"

"No, dear." Aunt May patted his arm. "She's such a sweet, *polite* young thing. And so pretty. She says her name is Cindy Sayers."

Peter blinked, his face registering his lack of comprehension.

"Sandy Sayers?" he asked.

"That's *Cindy,* Peter."

Peter turned to face the source of that voice. There, standing in the foyer, was Cindy Sayers—all five-feet-seven fantastically stacked inches of her. Peter stood staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at her smiling, movie-star face. When Aunt May had called her pretty, Peter had realized that the old lady was making perhaps the greatest understatement of her life. But Peter's dumbfounded expression was quickly replaced with a frown when he remembered who this girl was.

"You're J. Jonah Jameson's niece, aren't you?"

"Guilty."

Peter exhaled sharply. "Listen, lady, I told your loud-mouthed uncle, and now I'll tell you: I work alone! I don't need some amateur photographer tagging along behind me asking stupid questions every time I click the shutter."

"Peter!"

Aunt May's voice was stern, as if the old woman were reprimanding a child. "The young lady is a guest in this house."

Cindy smiled at the elderly woman. “Oh, that’s all right, Mrs. Parker. I think Peter’s just laboring under a slight misapprehension about our relationship.”

“What relationship?” Peter frowned. “I never even met you before just now.”

Cindy stepped closer to Peter, her long, shiny blonde hair swinging around her back, her sparkling green eyes smiling at him. “The good relationship we could have if you’d just listen instead of running off at the mouth, Mr. Parker!” Peter tried to speak, but Cindy cut him off with her breathless rush of words. “Uncle Jonah tells me you’re the best photographer working for the *Daily Bugle* these days, probably the best shutterbug in the whole city. Underneath all the shouting and the gruff exterior, he has a lot of respect for you and your talent.

“I’m not bad with a camera myself, Peter, and I know that if you’ll give me the chance, I can be even better. And Uncle Jonah really wants me to work with you. All I need are a few pointers . . . honest! I wouldn’t get under your feet, and I promise I’d keep the stupid questions to a minimum.”

She winked and chucked Peter under the chin. “So, what d’you say, *kimo sabe?”*

Peter tried not to let a grin break through his frown. *Gosh, she is kinda cute.*

“Now, Peter, I think Cindy makes an awful lot of sense,” May Parker told her nephew firmly. She smiled sweetly at the girl. “And she is being so nice about this, and she *is* that nice Mr. Jameson’s niece . . .”

“ *‘Nice* Mr. Jameson’!?”

“. . . and, besides, dear, there’s no reason why you two couldn’t be friends. You’ve been so depressed ever since you stopped seeing Anna Watson’s niece . . . Now, don’t deny it, Peter. I can always tell when you’re feeling blue.” Aunt May looked at the two youngsters, the bright red glow of embarrassment rising on her cheeks. “Well, what I’m trying to say is that I think you two children would make such a lovely couple.”

Peter threw up his hands in exasperation. *“Aunt May!”*

The old woman shook her head. “I’ll hear no more of this, Peter. The discussion is closed.” With that, Aunt May turned on her heels and marched into the kitchen to administer to her pot roast.

Despite himself, Peter smiled at the retreating figure’s back. *God bless that old woman,* he thought warmly. *If they ever start giving out Nobel Prizes for selfless devotion to others, Aunt May’s sure to become the permanent winner!*

Cindy Sayers stood with her arms folded across her chest as she

watched this warm family scene. “You ought to listen to your aunt, Peter.”

He smiled miserably. *I need this like I need a year of free spulunking lessons, right? What am I supposed to do with my shapely little shadow here if I’ve got to make a quick change to Spidey? Ask her to hold my pants?*

“My partner, huh?” he asked.

Cindy brightened. “Do I detect a note of surrender?”

“Well, no . . . I . . .”

Cindy linked arms with Peter and led him into May Parker’s modestly furnished living room. “Come on, Parker, admit it! The idea of working with me isn’t so bad.”

“Well, no . . . but . . .”

“And I could learn a lot from you, you being an award-winning photographer and all, right?”

“Sure, but . . .”

They sat down side by side on the sofa, Cindy maintaining a firm grip on Peter’s arm.

“Besides, Peter, I think you’re kind of cute.”

Peter looked suddenly into her smiling green eyes. *Hey, spider-sense! How is it that you warn me whenever there’s bad guys and bullets flying around . . . you know, stuff I can handle . . . but you never even give a tingle when there’s real danger around, like a beautiful blonde lady?*

Cindy smiled seductively at him. “Your aunt *said* you were shy, Peter, but . . .”

She’s got the darnedest green eyes. Funny I didn’t notice them before . . .

Awww, what the heck!

“Lady,” Peter said as he leaned forward and switched on his most dazzling smile and all the charm he could muster, “there may be a whole lot of things wrong with me, but shyness *ain’t* one of them.”

Cindy Sayers’s eyes twinkled brightly as she squeezed Peter’s arm. “Mister, that’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time!”

From the dining room. Aunt May called them in to dinner.

“And *that,”* Peter said as they stood and strolled arm in arm into the dining room, “is the best news I’ve heard since lunch! Just wait until you sink your teeth into Aunt May’s pot roast, Cindy. And her potato casserole? It’s so good you could die from it . . .”

Dinner *was* delicious, and, after she had accepted Peter’s and Cindy’s compliments on her cooking, May Parker settled back to enjoy her food and the delightful chattering of the two youngsters. She smiled secretly to herself throughout the meal, pleased with her

instincts. The moment Cindy Sayers had appeared at the front door asking to see Peter, Aunt May knew this was the girl for him. And now look at them! Peter had moved his chair closer to Cindy's and they sat looking, in May Parker's opinion, wistfully into each other's eyes while they ate.

May Parker knew her nephew well.

By the time dinner was over, Peter Parker was sure he was, if not in love, at least deeply infatuated. Despite his earlier misgivings, Cindy Sayers was everything he could ever want in a woman: intelligent, charming, witty, and beautiful. *Even her bad qualities are good!*

Aunt May stood firm in her refusal of Cindy's offer to help with the dinner dishes. "No, no, dear," she insisted. "And there's certainly no need for the two of you to sit here all evening and entertain an old woman, either!"

As well as she knew him, Peter knew exactly what his aunt was up to, even before she said, "So why don't you scoot now, and I'll just go to bed a little early tonight."

At the door, as Cindy walked ahead of Peter, he leaned over to kiss Aunt May happily on the cheek. "You are one sharp lady, lady," he whispered.

Aunt May beamed at her nephew's glowing face and patted his arm. "Take care now, Peter," she said. "Oh, my, it's getting rather chilly out. Is that jacket warm enough, dear?"

Peter laughed happily and left, holding hands with Cindy all the way to the subway. It was still early enough, so Peter suggested they take in a movie, to which Cindy readily agreed.

They sat side by side in the theater holding hands, and, for Peter at least, it was next to impossible to follow the movie. The girl beside him was too much of a distraction, and, midway through the second feature, he couldn't resist any longer. He leaned over and kissed her.

"You were right," she whispered. "You aren't shy."

Peter grinned, *Mary Jane who?*

By the time the evening ended, all too soon as far as Peter was concerned, there was no longer any doubt in his mind. He was head-over-heels in love with Cindy Sayers.

He walked her back to her Upper West Side apartment building, taking her past the sleeping doorman in the lobby.

"I'd love to ask you in, Pete," she said. "But it *is* kind of late and I do have to be up early tomorrow . . ."

"Sure." He smiled. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

Cindy smiled back at him and kissed him before stepping into her apartment. She started to close the door behind her, but Peter was still

there, holding the door open with his hand. “On second thought, gorgeous,” he said, “maybe I’ll call you as soon as I can find a phone booth. I don’t think I can wait until tomorrow.”

She laughed and ruffled his hair affectionately. “Nut!” she said. And he left, whistling all the way to the elevator.

Cindy Sayers sighed and pulled off her coat to hang it in the hall closet before walking into her darkened living room. She flopped wearily onto the couch and reached up to a switch on one of the two genuine Tiffany lamps that stood on either side of the sofa. The single bulb barely served to illuminate the spacious room, lavishly furnished and appointed with the finest of furniture and antiques.

“Quite a touching scene, my dear.”

Cindy leaped up, startled by the gruff voice that came from the shadows that still hung over the corners of the room. Her hand went quickly to her mouth to stifle a cry of surprise. She turned to face the speaker, her eyes searching the gloom until she could discern his dark shape seated comfortably in an easy chair.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. Her hand reached for the second Tiffany lamp to switch it on.

“No!” His voice was loud in the corner. “There’s enough light in here already, more than enough for you to tell me what you learned tonight from Parker.”

Cindy put her hands on her hips and stared at the man in the corner, not speaking.

“I *said,* Ms. Sayers, what’ve you learned for me tonight?”

Cindy looked up suddenly, her green eyes dull. “Please, Peter is such a nice guy . . . really! So sweet and considerate. I feel lousy doing this to him.”

The man chuckled sinisterly. “But you’re going to tell me anyway, my dear—unless, of course, you’d prefer I tell him the real reason you’re dating him.”

Cindy’s eyes flashed her hatred for the man, but that merely caused him to chuckle harder.

“Now, tell me *everything!”*

And, in a low, faltering voice, Cindy Sayers began to speak.

Three

"The *incumbent?"*

Glory Grant shook her head at the outburst from the office behind her. "It's been like that all morning, Peter," she said. "The man's just not seeing anybody today. I mean, the governor called this morning and when I buzzed inside to tell him, you know what he did?"

Peter Parker tried to look thoughtful. "He fired you?"

"Ha! No such luck, my man. No, he blew that police whistle of his into the phone. I nearly lost the use of my left ear . . . What's so funny, wise guy?"

Peter laughed. "Oh, that Jameson," he roared. "What's the argument about this time, and with whom is he having it?"

"Politics. He and Joe Robertson are trying to decide which lucky mayoral candidate gloms the *Bugle's* endorsement this year for the primary."

"That shouldn't be all that hard to decide. The way the *Bugle* made the incumbent sound more like a candidate for sainthood than the mayor's job four years ago, I'd think Jameson would back him again this year."

Glory shook her head. "As you may have gathered from the last broadcast from the front lines," she said, pointing over her shoulder at the closed office door, "the present Mr. Mayor isn't on J. Jonah's current hit parade."

"Who ever is?"

"I dunno—Attila the Hun, Jack the Ripper, Hitler, maybe."

The oak door behind Glory burst open and J. Jonah Jameson, the grizzled, gray-haired editor and publisher of the *Daily Bugle,* stuck his head out. "Ms. Grant," he growled, the sarcasm dripping from his every syllable, *"if* I'm not interfering with your socializing, could I impose on you for a favor?"

Glory swiveled in her chair. "Oh! Mr. Jameson."

Jameson pulled the ten-cent El Ropo Special cigar from his mouth, grinning suddenly at his pretty black secretary. Glory shivered inwardly. Jameson's rare smiles were not a pretty sight to behold, being something akin to the look a vulture has as it awaits a dying victim's death rattle. "I'm glad to see you still remember me." He shifted his gaze to Peter and the smile mercifully vanished. "What'd you want, Parker? I'm not buying any pictures today. Get lost!"

Peter stood and shuffled his feet in mock humility as he grinned boyishly at his boss. "Well, you old charmer, you, you've talked me into it! Mr. Jameson, I'll . . ."

"I said get lost, Parker," Jameson barked. "Get me Lewis Neil on the phone, Ms. Grant!"

Jameson grunted and disappeared behind the slamming door. Glory turned back to Peter, who had frozen in his shuffling pose. "He can't help it, Peter. I heard they dropped him on his head a lot when he was a baby."

"Can you *believe* that guy?" Peter grumbled angrily. "Last week he was practically begging me to work with his niece, and now he won't even give me the time of day."

Glory Grant feigned shock. "Why, Peter, m'man, our Mr. Jameson's a mover and a shaker . . . one of the king-makers! He can't be bothered with the minor annoyances of us peons."

"Yeah, well, this is one peon who's revolting," Peter declared as he set his shoulders and marched to the door.

"You can say that again."

"Har-de-har-*har!* I'm going in there to give old shark-face a piece of my mind."

"Albert Einstein ain't got enough to spare to make any difference with *that* man!"

"We'll just *see* about that, lady!"

Peter grasped the doorknob and stepped meaningfully into the paneled office. Jameson was sitting behind his desk, deep in thought. Joe Robertson, the *Bugle's* city editor and Jameson's righthand man, stood in front of the desk, both hands planted firmly on its top. "Face it, Jonah," Robertson said, "it looks bad for us to drop the mayor like

this, especially after we backed him to the hilt last time."

"He's a jerk," Jameson growled without looking up. "He's a jerk, and he suckered me into backing him. Well, J. Jonah Jameson doesn't make the same mistake twice. The mayor is *out!"*

Robbie sighed. Jonah Jameson was a hard man to argue with, especially if you wanted to win that argument, but Robbie would rather be doing this than anything else he had ever tried in newspaper work. Here, with Jameson, he was in the thick of things, having to struggle with the real problems that face a city every day rather than sitting behind a desk doing nothing but editing other people's words.

Frankly, Robbie loved his job.

Peter cleared his throat, but neither man heard him over the low murmur of the small Sony television that stood, unwatched, in the corner of the room. He saw it was tuned to Ian Forester's network news program, "The Forester A.M. Report."

"Excuse me," Peter called out.

Jameson's head snapped up. "Parker!"

"That's right, Mr. Jameson. I've got something to say to you, and you're going to . . ."

Jameson was out of his seat and rushing across the room to where Peter stood, defiant in his righteousness. "I am busy, Parker. Do you understand the concept? Do not disturb. Otherwise engaged. I can't see you now. I don't *want* to see you now . . . or ever!" His face was inches away from Peter's, the noxious fumes from his cigar wafting up the younger man's nostrils. "So whatever it is you've got on that tiny little brain of yours, *I don't care!* Am I making myself clear, Parker? Blink twice for yes and then get your butt out of my office."

Peter stood firm, arms folded across his chest. "Nope." He snuffled, trying to hold back a sneeze.

His eyes bulging, Jameson faced Robbie. "What're you sitting there gaping at, Robertson? Help me throw this insolent young pup the hell out of here."

Robbie tried to cover a grin with his hand by lighting his pipe. "The boy's almost as stubborn as you are, Jonah. Don't you think it'd be quicker for you to hear him out instead of spending all this time arguing about it?"

"Traitors!" Jameson roared. "I'm surrounded by traitors and mutineers!"

He stormed back to his desk and dropped heavily into his thickly padded chair. He made an elaborate show of removing his watch and placing it on the desk before him. He fixed his glare on Peter. "Sixty seconds. Talk fast, Parker," he said.

Peter sauntered up to his employer's desk and seated himself casually on its corner. "You're too kind, Mr. Jameson. I've decided to do you a favor and give your niece a chance."

Jameson frowned. "Niece?"

"Yeah. Cindy Sayers, your niece. I'm taking her on as an apprentice to teach her the photo news game."

"Great. Swell kid. Just like a daughter to me." He picked up his watch and replaced it on his wrist. "Good-bye, Parker." Thus finished with old, albeit unimportant, business, Jameson turned his back on the young photographer and resumed his conversation with Robbie Robertson. Peter stuck his tongue out at the older man's back, a move which caught the amused glance of Robbie. The city editor nodded his head minutely, his mouth clamped around his pipe in a tight, bemused line. Peter grinned and walked across the room to watch Ian Forester, America's most watched newsman, on the T.V.

Good ol' Robbie. No matter how loud Jameson screams, he just grins and bears it like a champ. He's probably the only person on the Bugle *staff that shark-face can't intimidate with his butter-knife-sharp wit.*

Meanwhile, Joe Robertson was trying to avoid future intimidation at the hands of his boss. The current mayor, the level-headed black city editor assured Jameson, was the lesser of all the evils presented in this year's primary election.

"That," Jameson declared dramatically, "is exactly my point, Robbie! Why should the voters of this city have to choose between bad, badder, and baddest?"

"Jonah," Robbie said patiently, "we're just trying to decide which man we should back. We're not choosing the candidates."

Jameson came out from behind his desk and paced back and forth across the thick carpeting. "I wish to hell we *were,"* he grumbled. "It'd be a refreshing change to have something other than a political hack in Gracie Mansion, someone the people of this city can put their trust in. We need another La Guardia."

Peter looked up from the T.V. "Like you, huh, Mr. Jameson?" he said.

Jameson stopped in his tracks and looked over at Peter. He was about to snap at the young man to shut up and get out, but instead he leaned slowly against the edge of his desk and folded his arms thoughtfully across his chest. He puffed billows of smoke from his cigar and fixed a gaze on Peter.

"Don't be such a wiseass, Parker. The people of New York could do a lot worse than to have me as their mayor."

Behind Jameson's back, Robbie waved his hand to get Parker off

this dangerous topic of conversation. Robbie knew his boss's ego far too well. But Peter was having too much fun.

"They have done worse, Mr. Jameson," he said.

"Darn tootin' they have, boy. I mean, let's look at this logically: What *do* the people want in a mayor?" Jameson asked rhetorically, relishing the idea more and more with every passing second. "They want honesty, integrity, fiscal know-how, managerial skills . . . a man who's got a good image, who can talk knowledgeably about the problems of New York with an eye toward solving those problems."

Peter slapped his knee and pointed at Jameson. "That sounds just like you, Mr. Jameson!"

Robbie had his head in his hands when Jameson turned back to him.

"Well, Robertson, what's the matter with you?"

"I think," the city editor said, "I'm coming down with a headache."

Jameson stared thoughtfully at the ceiling for a full minute. "His Honor the Mayor, J. Jonah Jameson," he muttered. "I like it!" The *Bugle* publisher whirled and declared regally, "Robbie, I have decided! I, J. Jonah Jameson, am going to run for my party's nomination for mayor of the city of New York."

Robbie stared at his employer, not quite believing what he had heard. "Well, now, Jonah," he began. Peter sat hunched over his corner, his attempts at stifling the giggle that rose in him rather unsuccessful.

"What's the matter, Robertson? Don't you think I'd be a good mayor?"

"It's not that, Jonah. But you've never run for elective office before. Being mayor of the city the size of New York is a big job, not the kind you can do and still run a daily newspaper."

Jameson shrugged that off. "We'll work it out." He sat down behind his desk and busied himself relighting his cold stogie. "Yessir—Mayor Jameson! That does have a ring to it, doesn't it, Parker?"

"Real Quasimodo-like, chief."

But Jameson was impervious to all sarcasm at that point. Already he had visions of himself behind that great desk in Gracie Mansion, issuing executive orders, dealing firmly and courageously with striking police and firemen . . . and presenting the key to the city to Dolly Parton.

"I mean," he explained to the skeptical Joe Robertson, "it's not like I don't know from politics. I've been in the thick of things since the Thirties, when politics were dirty and made great copy. Hell, I've spent more than my share of time in smoke-filled back rooms." He

leaned back, puffing thick clouds of pungent blue smoke into the air.

"They weren't smoke-filled until you got there, Mr. Jameson," Peter said.

Both men ignored him. Robbie said, "I don't know if you're making the right decision, Jonah. Running a newspaper is a lot easier than running a city of nine million people. Besides, I think your job here is just as, if not more, important as being mayor. Somebody's got to act as a watchdog for the public."

Peter tuned out the conversation, still snickering softly, and turned his attention back to the television. On the screen, he discovered with a jolt, were videotaped highlights of his rescue last night at the sporting goods store. He leaned forward and cranked up the volume to catch the middle of Ian Forester's voice-over commentary.

". . . night at dusk. Though police had cordoned off the area, WNYC T.V. cameraman Nick Landau managed to take these video-tapes with his mini-cam from atop a nearby telephone pole.

"Spider-Man, perhaps the most mysterious of New York's resident super-heroes and heroines, arrived on the scene shortly after police . . ." The scene shifted to Spider-Man's acrobatic leaps and rolls out of the range of the police sharpshooters. Peter nodded to himself. *Show them those moves, Spidey! Hot stuff!* The picture changed again to an extreme close-up of the front of Tockman's Sporting Emporium, showing the brief battle between the Web-slinger and the two thugs in silhouette.

" . . . and though police sharpshooters fired warning shots at the masked man to warn him away from the scene, Spider-Man managed to enter the store through an air-conditioning duct and subdue the alleged kidnappers in short order. No one was injured, and Chaim Tockman, the seventy-three-year-old owner of the store who suffered a heart attack, is reported in stable condition at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan."

Ian Forester, his open, gently lined face set in a somber expression, appeared next on the screen. "I chose this story to close my broadcast this morning, ladies and gentlemen, because it fits in with what I next have to say." His steel-gray eyes stared directly and professionally into the camera. "And that is, this is my last program with WNYC T.V. news. Effective immediately, I am resigning from television broadcasting."

"Robbie, Mr. Jameson!" Peter called without turning from the television set. "I think you might want to see this!"

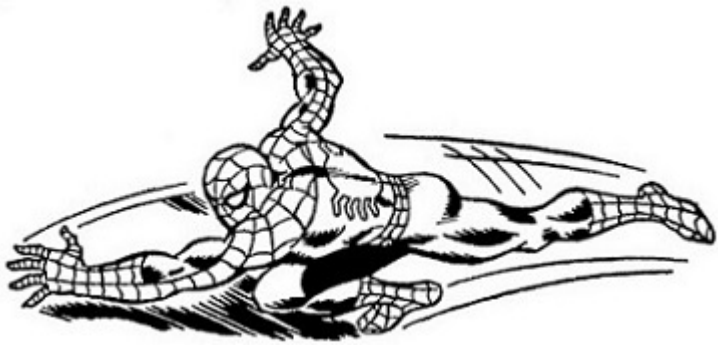
The two newspapermen broke off from their discussion. "What the devil are you still doing here, Parker? I thought I told you to take a hike."

Peter turned up the volume so the others could hear it. “As little more than a reader of news, I do not feel I can accomplish what I think needs to be done. I have, over the years, witnessed much from this seat, become intimate with the most powerful men and women in this city and this country, and I am convinced that I am needed elsewhere. In short, ladies and gentlemen, I feel there is one place in particular I can do the most good, and, therefore, I must concentrate all my time and energies there. That, my friends, is in the grand city of New York, my home for most of my fifty-seven years.”

Jameson and Robertson watched over Peter’s shoulder as the T.V. camera zoomed in for a close-up of the newsman. “Therefore, my friends, I have decided to place my name in nomination for the upcoming mayoral primary in New York.”

Jameson groaned and slapped himself on the forehead. “He’s doing this on purpose, Robbie,” the *Bugle* publisher moaned. “Do you hear what that glorified news reader is saying!?”

Robbie Robertson nodded slowly as he whistled through his teeth. “I hear him, Jonah,” he said. “That man is going to cream you!



Four

“Camera three, give me a close-up.”

The director was speaking softly in the hushed darkness of “The Forester A.M. Report” control booth, relaying his instructions to the trio of large color cameras in the well-lit studio beyond the soundproof glass window.

Over one channel of his headset, the director heard the various voices of crewmen and technicians chattering among themselves and him on the mechanics of the show. On the other, the well-known voice of Ian Forester came in loud and clear.

“Crime,” the newsman was saying. “Crime is the number one problem and fear of New Yorkers. As the film clip of the sporting goods store robbery so clearly illustrates, the people of this city are no longer safe anywhere. It is time this deplorable situation be brought to an end!”

The broadcast monitor, the central monitor that showed the scene being beamed across the nation, held the picture of Ian Forester seated behind his desk, hands folded before him.

“Whether last night’s robbery was the work of ordinary criminals, or, as some police experts have speculated, the masked vigilante called Spider-Man, is irrelevant. The point is this: rampant crime on the streets must end. I hope I will be the man who is able to help this city reach that goal.”

“Five seconds to credits,” the director said.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your years of faithful viewing. I hope to be with you still in the years to come.” He smiled knowingly into the lens. “Good morning and good luck.”

“Roll credits.”

Camera two kept its red eye on Forester in a long shot as he shuffled papers meaninglessly on his desk. It wasn't until he heard the director's voice in his earplug saying, "That's a wrap, people," and the light on the camera winked out, that he stood. He knew that by the time he reached his dressing room/office two floors above the studio in the WNYC Building, reporters would be gathering from all the major networks, newspapers, and wire services to interview him. He was, after all, big news.

A lighting technician walked up to Forester and shook the anchorman's hand. "Hey, good luck there, Mr. Forester. We're all going to miss working on your program."

Forester slapped the man's back and smiled. "Thanks, Artie. I just hope the crew I get to work on my campaign is half as good as the one I had here." The older man's eyes twinkled in the bright studio lights, leaving no doubt in Artie's mind as to the sincerity of Forester's words. After all the years he had spent before the television cameras, Ian Forester knew the power of those steel-gray eyes. They projected honesty and warmth. He was everybody's father.

He shook hands and exchanged small talk with several members of the crew as he strolled casually from the set. The longer he took to reach his office, the longer the newsmen from the nearby stations and newspapers would have to gather in force. News of his resignation from T.V. to seek elected office was of national importance because more people tuned in to watch him all across the country than any other man on the tube.

Even before he had graduated high school in the late 1930s, Ian Forester was an experienced journalist, working nights and weekends as a stringer, a freelance reporter, for the *New York Tribune*. At seventeen, he was the first reporter to break the story of scandal and corruption in the city's sanitation department. By the time he was twenty, just prior to the United States' entry into World War II, he was hired by United Press International and assigned to their rather dilapidated Pacific office in Oahu, just three miles from the ill-fated U.S. Naval base, Pearl Harbor. Two months after his arrival, on a routine story on a sunny December Sunday in 1941, Ian Forester proved to the world he was already a veteran newsman.

As the first Japanese bombers swept in over the base, Forester grabbed a tape recorder and started talking. He reported vividly on the attack that led to U.S. involvement in the war in Europe and was the first man to reach the torpedoed battleship *Utah* as it foundered. His dispatches from the "front" that day brought him to national prominence, which both gladdened and saddened his superiors at U.P.I. They were happy to have a star working for them. They weren't

too thrilled when they discovered WNYC radio was trying to steal him away from them.

For three weeks he wavered between a phenomenal job at U.P.I. and a mediocre post as London correspondent for WNYC. But it was a pretty, young secretary named Rochelle Marcus at the radio station who finally enabled Forester to make his decision. “Sure, it isn’t such a great job at WNYC,” she told him, “but that’s *now.”* It would, she assured him, lead to bigger and better things than the wire service could ever hope to offer. Forester decided to trust this girl’s instincts. He also decided he was falling in love with her. And, on the eve of his move to war-torn London to report on the aftermath of the Nazi blitz, they were married.

It’s commonly agreed in broadcast circles that if it hadn’t been for Edward R. Murrow, Ian Forester would have been the best thing to come out of World War II this side of Betty Grable’s legs. His heart-stirring broadcasts from the blazing streets of Piccadilly Circus as the bombs fell about him are still pointed out in broadcasting classes as being exemplars of their kind.

He left England in 1944 to follow Russian troops through heavy fire, and then, ultimately, into the devastated city of Berlin with the occupying Allied troops. His over-the-air descriptions of the taking of that city were said to have brought tears to the eyes of President Truman, grateful for an end to the war on at least one front.

There was no doubt about it. Ian Forester was star material.

After the war, he returned to the States and to New York, a hero to most of its citizens. It was he who had kept them informed throughout that long, difficult war so many thousands of miles away across the seas. They were grateful. But, more than that, they were loyal, and it was that loyalty to Forester that convinced WNYC that an audience existed for this man, so they set him up with a nightly news-and-commentary radio program. “The Forester Report” rose almost immediately to the top of the ratings.

When television was introduced in the late 1940s, Forester made the transition from radio with consummate ease and skill. His youthful, trusting face was soon a fixture in two out of every three households. His ratings never flagged in all the years since. Indeed, throughout his more than two decades on national T.V., he managed to accumulate more Emmy Awards than any other single person in the medium’s history. He was the most respected man in broadcasting. His reputation was beyond reproach, or, as one rival programming executive, looking for a way to beat the unbeatable in the ratings war, put it, “The only thing we’ve been able to pin on Forester so far is sainthood!”

Forester grinned broadly at his reflection in the elevator doors. He was, he had long ago decided, the perfect candidate for anything. He hoped the voters of New York agreed.

He stepped from the elevator down the corridor from his office. A crush of reporters and television cameramen were waiting impatiently for his arrival from the studio, harassing his already harried secretary with questions.

Ian Forester squared his broad shoulders and pasted his most sincere smile on his face. “Gentlemen,” he called out to them.

Instantly, mini-cams and blazing lights were pointed in his direction and anxious reporters rushed to him with pens and microphones poised.

He was on.

Five

The studio-owned limousine took Ian Forester to his Central Park West condominium and waited at the curb until the newsman was safely inside the lavish lobby. The uniformed doorman smiled, tipping his hat. “Caught your show this morning, Mr. Forester. You got my vote, that’s for sure.”

Forester grinned tiredly. “Thanks, Hank. I can use all I can get.” An elevator was waiting in the lobby and, waving good night to the doorman, he stepped inside and pressed the button for the penthouse.

He was exhausted. His day began each morning at 4:30, when he awoke to meet the limo that took him to his 8:00 A.M. appointment with “The Forester A.M. Report.” Then, as his program’s news editor, he worked through the day before his afternoon nap and preparation for his 7:00 P.M. network news program. But this day, even though he did not have to work on his evening newscast, had been longer than most, punctuated by impromptu press conferences and numerous calls from the media and his superiors at WNYC-T.V. A lengthy meeting with the network’s top executives ran through his scheduled nap time (his announcement, coming as a surprise in the middle of his contract-renewal talks, was not well met by them), and by the time he managed to leave the studio, it was past midnight.

All that was on his mind now was a quick shower and sleep.

The elevator opened on the penthouse floor and Forester let himself into the apartment. He didn’t bother switching on the lights as he

negotiated the spacious living room in the dark. But before he could reach the stairs that led to the upper floor of the duplex apartment, Forester stopped short, the small hairs on his neck bristling.

There was someone else in the apartment!

Forester heard the low, steady breathing in the middle of the room and pivoted. He swung around to face . . . whoever. He knew it was not his wife, she would have heard him enter and spoken up, and none of the kids was home. Who . . . ?

"Good evening, Mr. Forester." A deep, resonant voice pierced the darkness of the room. But Forester relaxed almost instantly. He recognized that voice.

"I should've figured," he said to the massive shape seated comfortably on the sofa. The tinge of fear was still in his voice and he realized he had to clasp his hands tightly together to stop their trembling.

The large figure shifted on the sofa. "Monroe," he said, "I trust even you are capable of turning on a light without detailed instructions, hmmm?"

A second, much smaller man, unnoticed by Forester until now, stood behind the door. He turned on the overhead lights. Forester glanced at him for only a second. It was the other man he was interested in.

The man was enormous. He stood well over six feet tall and weighed better than five hundred pounds. His completely bald head rose like a flesh-covered mound from his massive shoulders. His features seemed almost tiny in his fleshy face. The huge figure was splendidly decked out in a custom-made white jacket, a white scarf at his throat, held there by a large diamond stickpin. His trousers were dark, pin-striped.

"What do you want, Kingpin?" Forester asked.

The man was indeed the Kingpin, leader of New York's most powerful and feared organized-crime gang. He smiled at the newsman, pleased. "I merely wished to congratulate you on your splendid performance this morning, Mr. Forester. We were all most gratified to see you followed your instructions so faithfully."

Ian Forester started to speak, but held his tongue, fearing that his anger might not stay contained within him. He turned instead to the well-stocked bar set against the wall. As he poured himself a drink, he heard the sofa springs groan as Kingpin's ponderous weight was lifted.

"I should like a glass of white wine, my friend."

Forester whirled angrily, no longer able to conceal his anger. "I am *not* your friend, Kingpin," he spat. "And I don't like you coming into

my home, either. Maybe I have to work with you, but I sure as hell don't have to socialize with you. *That* wasn't part of the bargain."

Kingpin stepped calmly up to the bar and took his time choosing an appropriate wine from the selection on the bar. "Perhaps you do not yet completely understand, Mr. Forester." He poured half a glass of wine into a brandy snifter, sniffed its delicate bouquet, and turned to look into his host's face. "To begin, we made no bargain. I merely tell you what I expect from you, and you make certain it gets done. You do not have any say in any part of what happens, hmmm?"

Forester swallowed hard, unable to hold the fat man's steely gaze. Kingpin chuckled deep in his throat and sampled the wine, smacking his lips in appreciation. "Delightful," he said.

"Now, Mr. Forester, do we understand each other better?"

Forester nodded slowly.

"Excellent, my friend," the crime boss said. "Then I may allow you to speak to your daughter tonight. That would please you, I am sure." Kingpin glanced with a tight smile as the veteran newsman started at his words.

"A-Amy?"

"Indeed, Mr. Forester." He snapped his fingers at the man by the door. "Monroe!"

The silent man stepped forward and lifted the phone. He dialed a number and listened for several seconds before handing the receiver to Forester, who grasped it with trembling hands.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, baby, it's me. How are you, darling?" Forester asked, his voice tight with pent-up emotion. "Are they treating you well, Amy?"

The frightened voice of Forester's sixteen-year-old daughter said, "Yes, Daddy. When can I come home, Daddy?"

Forester squeezed his eyes shut, gripping the telephone so hard his knuckles turned white. It took him several seconds before he could trust his voice to reply to his daughter's plea. "S-soon, baby, I swear to you."

The phone went dead.

Monroe took the receiver from Forester's hand and returned, unsmiling, to his corner like a dutiful puppy.

For long moments Ian Forester stared with flashing, hate-filled eyes at the Kingpin. "You . . . animal!" he spat. "She's just a baby!"

Kingpin laughed. "Nonsense, Mr. Forester. Your daughter is sixteen years old, certainly old enough for you to have allowed her to travel unescorted through Europe and, regardless of her age, old enough to be a useful pawn."

Forester ran a hand across his damp forehead. “Europe!” He laughed without humor. “Lord, why’d I ever consent to that damned trip?”

Kingpin shrugged and dismissed the subject with a wave of his massive hand. “Again, nonsense, my friend. True, her taking the grand tour of the Continent provides a convenient excuse for your daughter’s absence, but I assure you, sir, my people would have been able to abduct her regardless of where she was.

“But there is no need for concern, Mr. Forester. All you need do to ensure her continued well-being and her eventual return home to the loving bosom of her family is cooperate. If not, I need but utter a single word and . . .” Kingpin’s voice trailed off ominously, leaving no doubt of his sinister intentions. “It is that simple.”

Ian Forester’s fist clenched and unclenched spasmodically at his sides as he glared at the fat man—this man who had stolen his child from him . . . who had stolen his dignity, his self-respect. “How,” he said through clenched teeth, the hate fairly choking him, “how in God’s name can such scum like you exist?”

Kingpin’s piggish eyes narrowed. He rose slowly from his seat and walked over to where Forester stood next to the bar.

“Watch closely, Forester,” the fat man said in a voice so low that the newsman had to strain to hear. “I shall do this only once.”

Kingpin faced the solid oak bar, a tight smile on his thick lips. He clenched a single massive fist and raised it over his head. Then, with lightning-fast speed, he brought it down on the polished wood with a thundering crash. Before Ian Forester’s eyes, the bar gave way beneath the fat man’s fist and splintered into a thousand shards.

Suavely shooting his cuffs, Kingpin turned back to Forester. “Do not be deceived by my appearance, Forester.” All pretense of friendliness was gone from his voice and the newsman stepped back before the verbal onslaught. “And do not think that because I have thus far chosen to deal with you on a Platonic level that I would be adverse to switching to more physical, albeit painful, methods of persuasion. I assure you I would not.” Kingpin returned to the sofa, smiling to himself. His little display of temper and strength had effectively quieted Forester.

“But if it is necessary for me to remind you of what you are to do, then I shall.” Forester was beyond any sort of reply, his will sapped by the fat man’s threats. Kingpin continued: “Forester, for the first time in this city’s history, the various heads of the organized-crime families have gathered together with myself as their leader. I do not lie when I say the negotiations leading to this alliance were long and difficult for me and were made at great personal sacrifice to myself and my wife.

“And what, Mr. Forester, do you think is the object of this rather unholy alliance?” He leaned forward. “It is to get you, Ian Forester, elected to the office of mayor of the city of New York!”

Kingpin’s eyes shone brightly as he sipped his wine. “It is a brilliant plan,” he said warmly. “Brilliant in its sheer simplicity! Imagine, we choose a winning candidate—a man such as yourself, who cannot lose the election—and we get him into a position of responsibility over the city’s coffers. By the time your first four-year term is up we will be in complete control over New York, having established a political machine to put the Tammany crowd to shame.

“And imagine the money, Mr. Forester! Imagine the amounts that could be siphoned from the city’s treasury, the theft hidden in ledger books to go undiscovered for a decade, at which time my colleagues and myself shall be long gone.”

Forester stood stock-still by the shattered bar, his head bowed.

“Come, come, Forester, you have cause for celebration, not sorrow. You are, after all, going to be the next mayor of New York, hmmm?”

“You mean puppet, don’t you?”

The crime king chuckled. “If you insist, yes. But you have little choice while your daughter is in my hands. Still, if your behavior is satisfactory and all goes well in November, your daughter will be returned to you.”

The newsman’s head snapped up. “Don’t taunt me, Kingpin,” he said. “You know as well as I that you lose your hold over me when I have Amy back here. There’d be nothing to stop me from going to the authorities with what I know.”

“Ah, but there *would* be. You see, when you win the election, you and your family will spend the next four years living in the gunsights of trained killers. Were you to step out of line but once, a member of your family would die in a tragic assassination attempt obviously aimed at you. A second wrong step, and the rest of your family, yourself included, would die.” Kingpin smiled. “But I trust your excellent judgment, my friend.

“Well.” Kingpin clapped his meaty hands together. “I thank you for your generous hospitality, Mr. Forester, but I really must be going. The hour is quite late and I know you must begin your day early, so good night. Monroe!”

Kingpin lifted his massive bulk from the sofa with remarkable ease, his almost dancer-like grace belying his great size and weight. Monroe opened the door for his boss and Kingpin left the veteran newsman to his own, dark thoughts.

Suddenly, Ian Forester felt like a very old man.

Six

J. Jonah Jameson paced across his spacious office, leaving a blue trail of smoke in his wake. The editor/publisher of New York's second largest daily newspaper was mad, his teeth clamped around the ragged stump of his cigar as he swore under his breath.

"It's a blamed conspiracy, Robbie!" he raged.

Joe Robertson glanced up from the editing of a campaign speech. "It's no such thing, Jonah."

Jameson pointed an accusing finger at the television set on a desk in the Jameson-for-Mayor headquarters on the forty-sixth floor of the Bugle Building. "How can you say that?" he practically howled. "Look how that man keeps doing . . . *that!"*

He was pointing at the video-taped image of Ian Forester, already campaigning vigorously across the five boroughs a week after his surprise announcement. He was shown entering the Board of Elections waving a handful of signed nominating petitions that his busy and eager campaign volunteers had quickly gathered to place his name on the primary ballot.

"That's a damned efficient organization Forester's been able to get together so quickly," Robbie said.

"Don't I know that, blast it! What I *don't* know—and would just love to find out—is: How come I don't have one just like it?" Jameson thundered. "There're only three days left to file to make the ballot, and mine aren't even signed yet."

"It's demographics, Jonah. You know that. Forester is attracting the college kids and young career people to his campaign, the ones who'll work their tails off for their man. You know how the kids latch on to political super-stars, like the Kennedys, McGovern, Carter. And, face it, there's nobody better known in this country with the exception of maybe the President and Muhammad Ali, and I wouldn't want to take bets on that. In this country, everyone under the age of thirty grew up watching Ian Forester three hundred sixty-five days a year. They've probably seen more of him than their own fathers."

Jameson spat out the remains of his El Ropo Special and lighted another almost immediately as he reached for the telephone on a cluttered desk nearby. "MacWalters!" he barked into the receiver. "I want your butt up here, pronto!" He slammed down the receiver and turned back to Robbie.

"I don't care w*ho* Forester is, Robertson," he growled. "All I care about is how I'm going to beat him in this blamed primary."

"Money," the city editor said thoughtfully. "We need money for a media blitz."

"Bah! Everybody in this city's too tight with their money."

"Not with Forester. His campaign's been bringing in a lot of the high-powered moneymen."

Jameson glowered at Robbie. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Yours, Jonah," he chuckled.

"Well, then sound like it, blast it!"

Peter Parker stepped off the elevator into the hustle and bustle of the Jameson-for-Mayor campaign headquarters. Harried-looking men and women, most of them in their forties and fifties, it seemed, hurried every which way across the large room, their arms loaded with reports and paperwork that seemed to the tired volunteers to actually grow and multiply in the dark of their desk drawers. Across the desk-lined room, other volunteers were manning banks of telephones, dialing numbers of registered voters from long computer lists to gain support for their man.

It was painfully obvious to Peter that Jameson was severely understaffed.

He spotted the candidate at a desk in the center of the room. As Jameson talked to Robbie, he sent up smoke signals from his cigar. Peter figured it was an S.O.S.

"What this campaign needs, Robbie," Jameson was saying as Peter approached, "is something big! Something really spectacular that'll grab the voters!"

"Say no more, Mr. Mayor," Peter said. "I have arrived."

An expression of distaste crossed Jameson's face. *"You* I don't need right now, Parker. Get lost!"

"Hey, Mr. J.! That's no way to make friends and influence voters." He grinned. "What you've got to do is put on that big, beautiful smile of yours . . . y'know, the one that shows off your dimples . . . and stick out your hand and say, 'Hi, my na—' "

"Parker!"

"Just trying to be helpful."

"Then leave."

"Campaign going a little slow, huh?" Peter tried to sound sympathetic.

"Not half as slow as your pea-brain, kid!"

"Maybe you ought to get yourself a new campaign manager."

Jameson plucked the soggy cigar from his mouth and glared at Peter. *"I* am the campaign manager," he said.

"Oh."

Before Jameson could reply, Bob MacWalters, a young copyboy for the *Bugle,* trotted up to the desk. "You wanted to see me, chief?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, MacWalters, don't call me . . ."

"Sorry, Mr. Jameson."

"That's better! Now, what's the story on my petitions? I gave them to you a week ago to get the necessary signatures."

"Er . . . I'm working on it, Mr. Jameson."

Jameson narrowed his eyes at the fidgety young man. "Define 'working on it,' MacWalters!"

"Well, er . . . I've got, um . . . most of the signatures, sir. They ought to be ready any day now."

"Try tomorrow, MacWalters."

"Sir?"

"I said, I want those petitions—signed, sealed, and delivered—on my desk by tomorrow, kid, by three o'clock so I can make the six o'clock news. Is that clear, or do I have to draw pictures for you?"

"I just love watching a dedicated public servant in action," Peter mumbled.

MacWalters gulped nervously and hurried away from his boss's desk. "Can't get good help these days," Jameson called after him.

"And speaking of lousy help, what'd you want, Parker—besides a chance to annoy me, that is?"

Peter pointed to the camera slung over his shoulder. "Wanted to

know if you wanted me to get some shots of Forester at his press conference."

"Press conference?"

"Yes, Your Honor. He's holding a biggie at his headquarters in the Americana Hotel in . . ." Peter checked his watch—". . . fifteen minutes. Now, don't say no, Mr. Jameson. After all, you can always stick the pictures on the obit page. I ain't picky as long as I get paid."

But Jameson was no longer listening. He was on his feet, hurriedly pulling on his jacket and straightening his tie. "Then don't just stand there, blast your eyes!" he said. "We've got to get over to the Americana!"

Peter was confused. "We? You want to take pictures, too?"

"No, stupid," Jameson growled as he grabbed Peter's arm and dragged him to the door. "You don't think I'm going to let Forester grab *all* the time on tonight's news, do you? C'mon!"

Peter was helpless. He shrugged at Robbie as he was pulled roughly into the elevator. As the doors closed, he called, "If I'm not back in a week, tell my Aunt May I went down fighting!"

"My former colleagues of the press"—Ian Forester smiled down at the assemblage of newsmen and women seated before him in the Americana's grand ballroom—"I think we can begin."

Immediately, several dozen hands shot up, vying for the candidate's attention. "Mr. Grodin," he said, pointing to the heavyset columnist from the *Daily News.*

"Nice choice, Ian," Grodin said, a smile spread across his cherubic face. "We were all betting your first question would come from a T.V. reporter."

Forester laughed easily with the rest of the room and leaned comfortably on the podium. "No longer, Bob," he chuckled. "Now that I'm a candidate instead of a newsman, all my T.V. chauvinism has mysteriously disappeared. These days, I love *all* reporters."

The assembled reporters were still laughing as J. Jonah Jameson pushed his way through the crowd, a hapless Peter Parker still in tow. "Listen to these clowns," Jameson muttered. "This is supposed to be a press conference, not *'The Gong Show'!* What're they laughing at?"

"It's called a sense of humor, Mr. Jameson," Peter said.

Jameson threw the young photographer a sharp glance. "You just take pictures, Parker. From now on, leave your mouth at home."

"That's the main issue," Forester was saying in reply to a question. "I don't think the people of New York are going to put up with police inefficiency any longer. And, frankly, I don't think they should have

to."

"Will you listen to that blowhard?" Jameson muttered as he pushed through the crowd of network cameramen around the foot of the dais before Forester. Finally, only the man from ABC News stood in his way, and, pushing him roughly aside, Jameson pulled himself up onto the stage.

"Mr. Forester," he thundered.

Ian Forester turned, a frown creasing his forehead. But years of live television reporting had taught him to immediately compensate for any on-camera surprises and to proceed as if they were the most natural thing in the world. Even if the surprise was unpleasant.

Like J. Jonah Jameson.

"If it isn't my distinguished opponent, Mr. Jameson," he said pleasantly. It's an honor to have you sit in on . . ."

"You can can the phony Mr. Nice Guy routine, Forester," Jameson said as he strode up to the microphones. "I'm here to talk issues."

"So am I!"

The voice thundered from the rear of the ballroom, causing every head to turn as one, searching for the speaker. And what they saw made them all gape in shock.

For, streaking down the aisle toward the dais was the familiar dark blue-and-red-clad figure of Spider-Man!

And, before anyone could make a move to intercept him, Spider-Man was clambering onto the dais, his gloved hands outstretched to grab a startled Ian Forester by the lapels of his jacket.

"I'm only going to warn you this one time, Forester," the masked man hissed menacingly. "I don't like you trying to pin that sporting goods store holdup last week on me, and I especially don't like your running for mayor of *my* town!" He tossed the startled man aside. "Get out of the race, Forester, or next time you'll get hurt bad . . . *terminally* bad!"

"Curse you, Spider-Man!" Jameson yelled as he rushed toward the masked man's side. "What're you trying to *do* to me!?"

With scarcely a glance at the *Bugle's* publisher, Spider-Man shoved Jameson aside and leaped down from the podium. He ran for the exit through the throng of reporters, all of whom were either too startled or frightened of the Web-slinger to do anything but snap photographs and roll their mini-cams to record the attack.

But nobody was more startled or concerned than the *Daily Bugle's* ace shutterbug, Peter Parker, who stared in shock through the viewfinder of his Nikon as the Wall-crawler raced past him.

Whew! Talk about your basic split personalities!

Seven

Even as the ersatz Spider-Man disappeared through the exit, the horrified throng of newspeople was surging forward onto the podium to help the dazed candidate, who lay in a crumpled pile on the floor.

All, that is, except Peter Parker.

He stood where he was for long, agonizing moments, reflexively taking pictures of the chaos before him, while allowing the crowd to push its way past him. Then, turning suddenly, he sprinted for the same exit the fake Spider-Man had taken.

Somebody's obviously trying to set me up for some kind of trouble . . . and help like that I can live without!

Peter ran out into a deserted corridor. He looked around quickly, searching for his evil double.

Bingo!

To Peter's right were a pair of double doors that led to a long service corridor running the length of the hotel. They were swinging slightly. *Looks like someone took off in an awful hurry through there . . . maybe someone like a phony Spider-Man?*

He pushed through the doors, coming face to face with a busboy carefully balancing a tray of clean glasses on his shoulder. Peter glanced down the corridor.

"Did you see anybody come through here just now?"

The busboy nodded.

"A guy in a red and blue costume?"

"A red and . . . *blue* costume?"

"Yeah, Spider . . . forget it! If he was here, you'd've noticed him. *Believe* me!"

Peter turned and raced back into the corridor outside the ballroom. *That means my phony friend must've taken the scenic route through the lobby—scenic for the public, that is! He probably wants the whole world to know that Spidey's been on the prowl doing a lot of nasties this morning.*

Without pausing, he grabbed the knob of a utility closet door and ducked inside. *Assuming I can still catch up with him, it wouldn't look too good to have Peter Parker tackling a fake Spider-Man in the hotel lobby!* He pulled off his shirt, revealing the spiderweb pattern of his costume underneath. In moments, his streetclothes webbed to his back in a makeshift knapsack, Spider-Man stepped out into the corridor.

What? No brass band?

Several yards down from the utility closet, the corridor branched off, leading past the newsstand and florist shop to the lobby. It was that route the Web-slinger took, running at full speed past hotel guests to the large, double glass doors that faced out onto Seventh Avenue.

A Texas oilman from Austin gaped in undisguised awe at the retreating figure. "Gawddarn!" he whooped happily to his wife. "New York's mah kind o' town, Mother! World Trade Center's got itself two towers, an' this here hotel's got *two* Spider-Men!"

Which, I guess, is Tex's way of telling me he went that-a-way!

Spider-Man leaped over a cart loaded down with luggage and pushed through the front doors without slowing.

A guy in a Spider-Man suit couldn't have gotten far without being spotted by someone, even in New York! I mean, look how much attention I'm getting, and I'm the real thing!

But before Spidey could clear the front steps under the awning of the hotel, a blue and white police car, its siren blaring, screeched to a halt at the curb. Before the car came to a full stop, a cop was jumping from the opened door, his revolver in his hand, aimed straight at the Web-slinger's heart.

"Hi, boys," said Spider-Man. "Which one of you brought the ice cream?"

It was pitch-black.

Seven men, each with the over-developed physique of professional weight-lifters, cautiously entered the darkened warehouse in single file.

All were identically clad in black sweatpants and tanktops.

All were identically armed with long steel knives.

They glided silently across the cold concrete floor in their bare feet, knives clutched in the manner of professionals.

Shuk!

As one, they stopped dead in their tracks, their ears straining in the darkness for the source of that almost inaudible noise. There was nothing . . . Wait! A slight disturbance in the air, as if someone moved ever so stealthily through the darkness. The brown-haired man in the lead squinted as his searching eyes slowly adjusted to the lack of light. He never saw the massive sledgehammer fist that sent him flying into the black pit of unconsciousness.

But the others did, and, their prey now located, they swiftly encircled him, with their blades held at the ready. They moved on the balls of their feet, feinting with their knives held out before them, drawing closer to the figure at their center, ready to slice him to—

There was nobody there.

In surprise, the burly men scattered, no longer bothering to mask their movements in silence. Their eyes had adjusted to the dimness now, and vague, dark shapes were discernible about them in the large room, shapes made deceptive in the inky blackness.

And then the lights went on.

They squeezed their eyes shut against the sudden-brilliant glare, but still they stood ready, their ears compensating for what they could not see. The real battle was about to begin.

“Gentlemen.”

The strongmen were scattered about the perimeter of the warehouse and they whirled quickly to face the center of the room and the massive mountain who stood there—the Kingpin.

The master criminal stood like a statue of flesh, a wry smile spread across his lips as he glanced at each man in turn. He wore a pair of sweatpants, his naked barrel of a torso gleaming in the light, his feet bare and his thick, powerful arms swinging loosely by his sides. He was unarmed. He moved like a ballet dancer on his toes, yet his seemingly fleshy body was solid, giving but a hint of the well-developed sinews beneath his pale skin.

He chuckled deep in his chest. “Too bad, gentlemen. Your clever move, alas, failed to catch me by surprise.”

Several of the burly men, smiles on their cruel lips, advanced on Kingpin with blades held high. Kingpin watched with apparent boredom as they formed a semicircle in front of him, the overhead lights glinting off the flashing knives.

Kingpin was almost a blur as he stepped forward and reached for

the first man's throat with his fleshy fists. He grabbed the man by neck and crotch, lifting him over his head like a child's rag doll. The man's knife dropped from limp fingers as the huge man heaved him at the onrushing musclemen. He plowed like so much dead weight into three of his companions, sending them sprawling.

"Awright, fat boy," one of them growled. "You've had it now!"

"Have I?"

Kingpin leaped forward, pivoting on his left leg as he drove his right foot in a perfectly executed savate kick to the speaker's chest. Before the man could topple to the ground, Kingpin's right hand snaked out and gathered his T-shirt, yanking the thug upright.

"You see, my friend, your first mistake was thinking I was merely another fat man." Kingpin's left hand was a blur as it slapped back and forth across the man's face a dozen times. The muscle-bound man was unconscious long before Kingpin let him drop to the floor.

"Your second mistake was verbalizing that thought."

Kingpin did not wait for another attack. Rather, he took the initiative and sprang into the center of the cluster of strongmen. Without any apparent attempt at aiming his blows, the crime king flailed his mighty fists about, striking at random.

"It was people like you who ridiculed me when I was a boy!" A muscleman went sailing limply through the air. "I *was* nothing more than a fat boy then, a disgusting, obese specimen of America's youth." Kingpin's fist ended another thug's participation in the fight. " 'Fatso,' they called me. 'Look at Fatso waddle!' Oh, I suffered those taunts, for there was nothing I could do against my bigger, stronger tormentors." An explosion of air from startled lungs announced the finish of a third man.

"But that was then! As I grew, I began to realize my true potential, and I trained both mind and body to strike back against cruel society. For long hours each day, I drove my body to the limits of endurance, watching as, slowly but surely, that endurance increased!" A casual backhanded sweep of his hamhock fist drove two men back, "And *I* endured! But still I was looked upon as a freak, a man out of place in normal society. So, I decided that if I was not wanted by them, I would join the company of other outcasts, the criminal element so prevalent in any big city." Another man cried out as Kingpin's elbow crushed his nose. "But I was stronger, smarter than any of them, and soon I rose to the top of the criminal syndicate, never fearing to use either brain or brawn against any who stood in my way!"

But there was none left to hear those final words, for all were lying unconscious or too engrossed in their own pains to pay heed. The Kingpin of crime stood among his victims, his tiny eyes gleaming with

pleasure.

"Excellent, my friends!" he roared, clasping his hands together. "That was a most invigorating workout. You may pick up your payment from my man Monroe on your way out."

He turned, starting to leave the carnage he had wrought. Chuckling to himself, he glanced over his shoulder. "That is, when you have all regained consciousness."

Without warning, a sudden weight landed squarely on the fat man's broad back. It upset his balance, and even as he righted himself, his hand reached back, groping. Thick, powerful fingers struggled to find a hold under Kingpin's fleshy chin. The crime lord grunted and stepped back abruptly, shifting his great weight to his other leg and flipping the weight on his back over his shoulder. The master criminal's attacker was a Japanese sumo wrestler, a yellow giant almost rivaling the Kingpin in size and strength. He thudded to the floor, a pained grunt the only sound he made.

Kingpin's face brightened at the sight of this new challenger. The sumo scrambled to his feet and crouched low in the traditional style of his ancient craft, stalking his victim in short, sliding steps. Kingpin feinted right, faking out his opponent and charging in under the Japanese's outstretched arms. His balled fists slammed hard into the other's muscular stomach just before he brought his elbow down on the Oriental's exposed neck.

This time, however, he did not allow the sumo to recover as he moved in immediately for the kill. He grasped the Oriental's arm just above the elbow and yanked it sharply toward him as he brought his foot down on the back of the fallen's neck. A sharp, brittle crack accompanied the breaking of the sumo's right arm. The Japanese was mercifully unconscious.

Smiling smugly, Kingpin straightened. He sauntered through the tangle of bodies strewn about the cold floor and casually wiped the perspiration from his shining face as he left the room.

"I don't like to be kept waiting, Kingpin!"

The speaker was a tall, slim man with a hawk-like face topped by a full head of wavy, silver hair. He sat facing the big man over steepled fingertips at the far end of a long conference table. Kingpin, fully dressed now, pulled out his own seat at the opposite end of the table in the oaken-paneled room and silently regarded the silver-haired man across from him, one of seven men seated around the table.

He was Silvermane, head of the second most powerful criminal organization in New York. For years, his gang had fought bitterly against that of the Kingpin for control of the city's illegal activities,

ranging from twenty-five-cent bets on the numbers to the multi-billion-dollar drug trade. Both organizations had established strong footholds in various areas and had only recently come to an uneasy peace.

To Silvermane's left sat Carlo "The Tomato" Tommasti, chief of Brooklyn's notorious murder-for-hire gang. He was a short, dapperly dressed man whose dull black eyes served to effectively mask the cold, calculating animal intelligence that had helped him climb to his current high rank in the city's criminal elite.

Next to him, Milo Milkerstein from Queens sat brooding at the blank notepad on the table before him. Unlike the others who sat at the table, the eighty-seven-year-old Milkerstein was seated in a wheelchair. Since 1928, when he had inherited his territory from the then Godfather Vito Rossi, he had gained control of virtually all criminal activity in his home borough.

Beside the aged Milkerstein sat Alim Nassor, recent conqueror of the very valuable South Bronx drug trade. Nassor, formerly Alan Bettes, was a tall, bearded black man who favored the costume native to the Islamic country from which he had taken his name.

Across from Nassor sat the black man's counterpart for the rest of the Bronx territory, Lawrence Hilderbrant III. To readers of newspaper gossip columns, the Hilderbrant name was instantly recognizable as that of the country's richest, if most irresponsible, millionaire playboy. But to his fellow members of the underworld community, he was known as one of the most cunning businessmen and ruthless of human beings.

To Hilderbrant's right sat the small, slim master of the Chinatown criminal district, Mr. Soo. Since the Fifties he had held the valuable lower Manhattan territory despite constant opposition from the area's many youth gangs. A vast majority of the gambling dens and houses specializing in the more popular Oriental opiates made many millions of dollars a year for this comparatively small criminal empire.

And, finally, Emmanuel Cortez sat in the sixth seat along the table's sides. Cortez was the newest member of this criminal combine, having only the month before assumed control of a large stretch of lucrative New York territory by assassinating the area's former boss. The large Spanish man felt he deserved his spot on the board. He had personally killed the old boss on Park Avenue at the height of the noon lunch rush.

Silvermane straightened in his seat. "I said, Kingpin, I do not like to be kept waiting. This meeting was scheduled to begin half an hour ago!"

"I was detained." The Kingpin explained to no man.

"We're all busy men," Silvermane said evenly. "We don't have the time to waste sitting around waiting . . ."

"He is here, Silvermane," Milo Milkerstein said. "And the purpose of this meeting isn't to discuss our colleague's punctuality."

Alim Nassor nodded in agreement. "Yeah, man. If you don't like it, buy the man a gold watch for his birthday. Otherwise, let's get *on* with it."

Silvermane sat back and glared across the long table at the Kingpin. His time would come.

Kingpin merely smiled thinly at Silvermane. "It has been exactly one week since Mr. Forester announced his intentions to seek his party's nomination. From all reports I have received, everything is proceeding smoothly and as per plans."

"What about Jameson?" Carlo Tommasti said.

Kingpin dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "Granted, we had not expected J. Jonah Jameson's entrance into the race, but I do not foresee this posing any difficulties. His organization is weak, at best, and the early polls show he is running behind both Forester and the incumbent."

Lawrence Hilderbrant III shook his head. "I don't know about that, Kingpin. As you know, I spend a good deal of time with most of the city's more affluent residents, and, frankly, many of them are slowly becoming interested in Jameson's tax-cut proposals." The playboy criminal grinned. "Hell, if I didn't stand to make so much loot off Forester winning, I'd almost be convinced myself. His ideas *could* save a lot of money for a lot of rich folks."

"Yeah, but there's a whole lot more poor than rich in this city, man," Alim Nassor said. "I know. I been there."

Hilderbrant nodded vigorously. "Sure. But they'll . . ."

"Gentlemen, please," Kingpin interrupted. "As I recall, when we first embarked upon this endeavor, we were unanimously agreed that Ian Forester was the perfect, unbeatable candidate. Merely because a man we could not have foreseen has entered the race does not change that, hmmm?"

Silvermane said, "You talk a lot about how you've planned this operation down to the smallest detail, how nothing can possibly go wrong." The hawk-faced man did not bother to disguise his hatred for the Kingpin. "And we've accepted your word, Kingpin—on everything! We've put up three million dollars apiece to get in on this . . . and all on your word alone!

"Now, maybe this *will* work, Kingpin, and maybe we all stand to make a hell of a lot more than three million. But, dammit, man, when

are you going to let the rest of us in on this brilliant scheme of yours? As equal partners, I think we deserve to be told *everything!"*

Kingpin leaned forward and rested his clasped hands on the polished tabletop. "Silvermane," he said, "you agreed long ago, with the rest of these gentlemen, that should we go forth with my plan, *I* was to be in control. *Total* control. And all I ask from you in return for being made a part of this is your money and cooperation. If you do not intend to give me both, I shall gladly return your stake money to you and you will be free to leave." Kingpin spoke softly, but none of the men seated around the table missed the harsh, menacing tone in the fat man's voice.

Silvermane stood and leaned his tightly clenched fists on the table. "Damn you, Kingpin!" he hissed through clenched teeth. "Who do you think you are? Do you think you're the only high-caliber criminal in the city? You forget, I, too, have had to fight Spider-Man to retain my territory!"

"And lost."

Silvermane's clenched fist rose and slammed onto the table. "What about *you?* I don't recall ever hearing of a Kingpin victory in *any* of your many battles with the blasted Wall-crawler."

The fat man started to rise to his feet, his eyes on Silvermane.

But before either man could say anything further, Mr. Soo spoke up. "Gentlemen," he said.

The small Chinaman rose and looked quickly to either end of the table. "Gentlemen," he repeated softly, "we accomplish nothing by bickering amongst ourselves. Please, take your seats and let us reason together like friends." Mr. Soo remained standing until the two rival criminal bosses sat. Then, taking his own seat, he continued, turning first to Silvermane. "As Kingpin says, Silvermane, you agreed to his terms long ago, as have we all. The operation is already in progress, and matters proceed smoothly and according to plan."

Turning to the other end of the table, Soo said, "And I am sure, my friend, that they shall *continue* to run as they have. I have great faith in your ability, Kingpin."

Kingpin nodded his head in Soo's direction, but his beady eyes remained fixed on the man seated across from him. "Thank you, Mr. Soo," he said. "Now, if there is nothing else . . . ?"

Silvermane's chair scraped noisily across the floor as he pushed it back and stood.

"Just this one thing, Kingpin—if this doesn't work, you can be sure you're finished in this city!" The tall man strode to the door, stopping as he reached for the knob. "Finished for *good,* Kingpin!"

He yanked open the door and disappeared down the hall.

Kingpin's eyes narrowed at the retreating man's back. "I shall not fail."

Shall I?

Eight

"Stay just as you are, Spider-Man! Don't move! Don't even breathe hard!"

As he stared down into the barrel of Patrolman Nat Raucher's revolver, the Web-slinger felt no compulsion to disobey that order. He stood stock-still under the Americana's awning and slowly raised his hands above his head. "Okay, friend. Let's not get carried away with that pop-gun, now."

Raucher kept his aim steady as he slowly stepped toward Spider-Man. Behind him he could hear his partner radioing for assistance. That was fine with him. Purse-snatchers and flashers he could handle. He wasn't so sure about super-powered criminals, nor was he particularly anxious to find out.

"Everything'll be cool if you just keep your hands right where they are," Raucher said, trying to keep his voice sounding official.

Spider-Man shrugged. "That's where they belong," he said, "right there at the ends of my arms."

Well, so long, phony Spidey! But then, considering I'm standing here with a nervous cop pointing a gun in my direction, that's probably the least of my worries!

"Hey," Spider-Man asked him, "is this gonna take long? I've got an appointment at . . ."

Officer Raucher's gun wavered slightly. *Jeez,* he thought, *I wish the back-up unit would get here!* Spider-Man's large, staring eyes made the patrolman nervous. Those white orbs seemed to look right through him, reading his very thoughts. Nor did he like the Web-slinger's light,

snappy tone. Hell, the guy wasn't bulletproof, was he? Why didn't a loaded gun, in the hands of a trained professional, intimidate him?

That's the ticket, Joe Bolton! Keep your eyes on my face! Spidey could hear the sounds of approaching police cars as he curled the middle fingers of both hands to surreptitiously touch the hidden buttons in his palms. The nervous cop did not hear the webbing shoot from Spidey's wrists and adhere to the underside of the awning.

"Well, I hate to break this up, pal, but . . . !"

Raucher was confused. "Huh?"

Spider-Man was smiling under his mask as he leaped straight up to cling to the metal frame of the awning. He shot another strand of webbing at the policeman's gun, enveloping both hand and pistol in an unbreakable cocoon. Before Raucher could call to his partner, the Web-slinger tore a hole through the canvas awning and pulled himself through the large rend in the fabric. Then, using the canvas as a trampoline, Spidey bounced once, twice, and leaped for the hotel's façade.

Pii-ting!

A ricocheting bullet sprayed chips of concrete into the Wall-crawler's face. He glanced quickly over his shoulder and saw Raucher's partner standing in the middle of the gutter, realigning his gun for a second shot. *I don't remember signing on as a target for the N.Y.P.D.*

Spider-Man stopped on a ledge and turned to fire twin streams of webbing at the second cop. Then, chuckling, the Web-slinger continued up the side of the wall, swiftly vanishing through an open window.

That cop'll think twice before shooting at me again. Let's see how he likes being webbed to the white line in the middle of Seventh Avenue!

Joe Robertson handed a sheaf of freshly edited copy to a passing copyboy, never bothering to look up from his desk in the *Daily Bugle's* city room. The presses had been set to roll with the early edition of the *Bugle* half an hour earlier, but that was before an irate J. Jonah Jameson called his city editor with the story of Spider-Man's attack at the Americana. A trio of rewrite men, looking forward to a leisurely lunch after a particularly heavy morning of work, were set before typewriters to churn out copy for the restructured front page, working from notes phoned in by Jameson.

"And if you see that blasted Parker . . ." the publisher growled when he talked to Robbie.

"Does he have photos?" Robbie said, working against a deadline

that had already passed.

"How the blazes should I know? The little twerp just took off on me! When you see him, *kill* him for me. I'll owe you one."

But Robbie had no time for homicide when a breathless Peter Parker rushed up to his desk, a roll of film clutched in his hand.

"Robbie," the young photographer said, "have I got a sto—"

"Sorry, Peter, I can't talk now. I'm in the middle of putting together the Spider-Man story."

Peter smiled and dropped the roll of exposed 35mm film onto the city editor's desk. "Then maybe I could interest you in some pix of the aforementioned phony felon?"

Robbie frowned at the film and then at Peter. "Phony?"

"You got it, friend. And the proof is in the pictures!"

Robbie touched the small metal canister and his frown deepened. "Jonah isn't going to like this, son. If I'm going to run this, you'd better be able to back up what you're claiming."

"Believe me, that guy at the Americana was a phony." *Either that, or I've gone totally schizo!*

Robbie leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtful for several minutes as he chewed on a pencil eraser. "Okay," he said at last. "Develop them and show me your proof, Peter. If it's good, I'll go with it."

Peter snatched the film from the desk. "They're as good as developed, oh, wise and wonderful city editor. I'll be right back!"

As Peter hurried across the vast city room, he saw Cindy Sayers rushing toward him, several cameras slung over her shoulders and around her neck.

"Good Lord, Cindy! You look like a walking pawn shop!"

She kissed him on the cheek. "Yeah? Then maybe I've got your watch somewhere in this mess, Parker. You were supposed to meet me here an hour ago for my first lesson in the wonderful world of picture-taking."

"Oh, boy!" Peter slapped his forehead. "I forgot," he said, grinning sheepishly. "Your uncle, Mr. Warmth, requested the pleasure of my company at a press conference. I'm the only photog in town who remembers to shoot his best side."

"What would Uncle Jonah want with pictures of the seat of his pants?"

"Hey, kid! You've got definite possibilities. I'll explain in the darkroom."

“Turn on the lights, Cindy.”

Peter moved the exposed photos around in the tray of fixer solution in the *Bugle’s* darkroom. Slowly, gray patches formed on the exposed paper, darkening with each moment until the black-and-white images were clear. Peter picked the wet print out of the soup with a pair of tongs and spread it to dry on a paper towel alongside the others.

“Voilà!”

He arranged the pictures in sequence on the workbench, with Cindy leaning over his shoulder, watching. “It’s a good thing I . . .” He was interrupted by a knock at the door. “Enter!”

It was Robbie. “You about ready, Peter? I’ve got exactly ten minutes to put this edition to bed.”

“Just finished,” he said, pointing to the pictures. “Like I was saying, it’s a good thing I had an automatic winder on the camera, so I got about two shots a second of the attack.” He pointed to the first picture. “See? This guy came running into the ballroom . . .”—Peter’s finger followed the sequence of events—“. . . and then, instead of just leaping up onto the dais like the real Spider-Man would’ve, he has to schlep himself up. Clue number one.” His finger moved along to a close-up of the fake Spider-Man holding Forester by the lapels. “Clue number two, here! Look real closely at this Spider-Man’s costume, Robbie. Notice anything?”

Robbie leaned forward and scrutinized the still-wet photograph. He followed Peter’s finger, squinting at the costumed figure. The boy was right! There was something amiss with the familiar costume and mask. It seemed rather loose on the figure, and the white eyes on the mask were definitely the wrong shape.

“Yes,” the city editor agreed. “Yes, I see what you mean.”

Nodding, Peter pulled an old photo from a shelf and handed it to Robbie. It was a shot of Spider-Man facing the camera in a dark, littered alley. “I took this picture of Spidey a couple of months ago. This is the real one. Compare the two and tell me if you don’t see the difference.”

Silently, the editor compared, squinting first at one picture and then the other. He nodded. “I’m inclined to agree with you, Peter. After all, you *are* the *Bugle’s* resident Spider-Man expert.”

“Well, I have been known to get shots of him in action from time to time. But it’s been often enough that I think I can tell the man’s moves well enough to know him when I see him. And *that,”* he said, stabbing a finger at the fake Spider-Man, *“ain’t* the genuine article.”

Robbie selected half a dozen of the best photographs and headed for the door. “Okay, Peter. It’ll take some fancy talking, but I think I can

persuade Jonah to go with this."

Cindy was smiling, silently applauding, when Peter turned to her. *"Quite* a performance!" she said. "Not only is he cute, but the whiz-kid takes a mean photograph and can play Ellery Queen, as well."

" 'Twas nothing, ma'am," he said, bowing from the waist.

"How *do* you do it, anyway? I mean, get all those photos of Spider-Man?"

"Did Houdini tell his secrets?"

"I thought you were going to teach me *everything* you knew about news photography. I never realized you planned to keep things from me."

"Only this, m'lady." He picked up his camera and said, "Now, if you'll just fetch your Brownie camera, I think it's time we got started teaching you some of the finer points of taking pictures."

"That's what I'm here for. What's first?"

"Always make sure there's film in the camera before trying to take pictures."

"Makes sense. What else?"

"Don't forget to take off the lens cap."

"You're just a fount of information, aren't you?"

"Are you kidding? Ansel Adams never made a move without giving me a call first!"

"But, seriously, folks . . . !"

"Okay. We hit the streets and keep our eyes open for something to take pictures of."

"Sounds tremendously exciting." She yawned.

"You'd be amazed at what you can run into on the sidewalks of New York, cutie." . . . *like maybe a fake Spider-Man! I'd sure love to get my gloves on him before he does any permanent damage to my otherwise sparkling reputation. 'Course, if and when I do catch up with him, I'm going to make sure my fists are inside my gloves!*

And you can take that to the bank, Red Ryder!

Nine

The Kingpin was tired.

For long minutes after the seven crime bosses had departed, he sat in the soft, comfortable darkness of his study. He reclined in a large easy chair, trying to shut off his thoughts. But it was hard. There was so much riding on this . . . so much more than the other participants in the operation could possibly conceive.

Except, perhaps, Silvermane.

He could be a problem. No, he *was* a problem. Silvermane had a suspicious mind and he was a brilliant criminal. If there was any one cog that could bring the vast machinery Kingpin had set into motion to a grinding halt, it was Silvermane.

And the Kingpin did not like to take chances.

Indeed, he could not afford to. Not this time.

Perhaps . . . ?

"Are you awake, my dear?"

Kingpin's eyes snapped open as he sat up. "No, Vanessa. I was merely resting my eyes a moment. I did not know you were here."

"Yes."

She was a tall woman. When she was younger there was no doubt she was a beautiful girl, and the years had been more than kind to her, for she had matured into a striking woman, almost regal in carriage and bearing. There was just the slightest hint of an Asiatic cast to her eyes, which were framed by high, delicate cheekbones. Her

hair was long and jet-black, save for the streak of white that started at her forehead.

She was the Kingpin's wife.

She walked across the room and switched on the desk lamp. When she turned to her husband, her delicate forehead was furrowed in thought.

"Is something troubling you, my love?"

"There is, husband." She nodded.

Kingpin stood and went over to his wife. He smiled affectionately and cupped her face in his monstrous hand. "Then tell me, my love," he said softly. "There can be no secrets between us, hmmm? There never have been."

"That is what I had thought. Perhaps . . . perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps we both were."

Frowning, he drew back. "Talk sense, Vanessa."

She looked at him, her eyes hard and blazing with cold blue fire. "I have been here for the past hour, husband. I was here while you were conferring with your . . . partners."

"Merely business, my dear." He shrugged. But his heart felt suddenly cold in his chest.

"Business," she repeated. "I-I overheard your business."

"Did you?" His voice was calm as he pursed his lips in thought and sat himself on the edge of his desk. He folded his arms across his barrel chest. He wished this was not happening.

"Then I shall not lie to you, Vanessa."

"Th-then, it is true? You have gone back to that . . . that cesspool?"

He nodded slowly, holding her steely gaze.

"But *why?* Have you not had enough of that existence? Or have you forgotten what it is like? The running, the uncertainty, the fear that any face in the crowd could be the one that holds the weapon that will end your life! My God!"

"This time it shan't be like that."

"It is always like that!" she shouted. "Don't you think those men in there would like nothing better than to see you dead? They are vultures, all alike. They do not want to play second fiddle to any man. They are dangerous men with big egos. You scare them and that makes them your enemies!"

The Kingpin said nothing.

Vanessa laughed bitterly and shook her head. "No," she said. "You, too, are a dangerous man, husband, and you, too, have an ego. I cannot scare you into backing away from this."

"No."

"But I can call on your honor."

He smiled. He dearly loved this woman, who knew him so well. Why must he make her life so painful?

"You swore it would end," she said. "And I swore that if it did not, our marriage would end, instead."

"I remember."

"Sometimes I wonder," she whispered, blinking back tears.

Kingpin wrapped his thick arms around her and drew the woman to him, holding her tenderly. "It is not that simple," he replied softly and kissed her fragrant hair. "My withdrawal must be gradual, love. And it must be total and clean. I cannot risk our lives by leaving loose ends hanging about that may one day return to entangle us. Do you understand?"

"But . . ."

He held her tighter against his chest. "Please," he breathed, "you must allow me my time, my love. I . . ." He stopped.

Vanessa turned her eyes to him.

"I . . . I could not live without you," he whispered. "I would not want to."

"Then you may have your time, husband. But, please, *do it!"*

They stood in each other's arms for a long time. Yes, he would end it, he thought. He would complete this operation, and when it was done, he would be free to leave this life behind.

But before that happened, Silvermane had to die!

Ten

“That’s the ticket, kiddo. Just hold it like that and shoot.”

She shook her head, doing as he instructed. “This is really dumb,” she said. “How am I going to get anything this way?”

“Trust me! It’s the way all the big pros do it.”

“But . . .”

“Just do it! Results are guaranteed or your money back.”

Cindy Sayers held her Nikon camera over the heads of the taller photographers and newsmen standing before her and snapped the shutter in the general direction if Ian Forester. The candidate, flanked by a trio of attentive plainclothes policemen, smiled broadly and waved to the throng of supporters who had come to see and hear him speak at the skating rink in Rockefeller Center. Hundreds of midtown workers who had decided to skip lunch that day for an opportunity to catch a glimpse of America’s premier broadcaster stood three deep at the railing overlooking the sunken rink, their cheers and applause for the man below filling the afternoon air. Scores more jammed the sunken rink itself, now empty of ice in the late spring. And, scattered throughout the crowds, attempting to appear inconspicuous, were alert security men from both city and private agencies, scanning the area for the slightest hint of danger.

Peter Parker eyed the crowd. “Will you just look around you? Forester’s got more cops than supporters here. Half the crowd must be

security men!"

"They took Spider-Man's threat seriously, I guess."

Peter wagged a finger at Cindy. "Ah-ah!"

"They took the *fake* Spider-Man's threat seriously, then," she said. "What are you, anyway, Peter? Spider-Man's press agent?"

"Something like that."

"Well, I think they're overdoing it a bit."

Peter glanced around him, searching through the sea of faces gathered in the rink. "As well they might, m'dear. Still, nobody's seen neither hide nor webbing of him since the attack last week. Could've been a one-shot deal," he said thoughtfully.

Cindy gestured at the line of uniformed police flanking the makeshift grandstand in the center of the rink. *"They* don't think so."

"Heck, they get *paid* to be paranoid, Cindy."

"And I do it for free!" she said. "Look, Peter, I've just got bad vibes about this whole setup."

So do I, truth to tell! Somebody's out to force Forester out of the race and discredit Spidey in the process. Whoever was under that mask went through too much hassle and risk for a hoax, and I'm betting my bottom cartridge of web-fluid that he'll be back.

Only this time, I'll be waiting for him!

The candidate mounted the steps to the speaker's platform, his clenched fist thrust high over his head in a sign of victory to the people. He strode confidently across the platform, pausing only momentarily to shake hands with the local city politicians seated there before stepping up to the microphone.

The crowd continued its roar of approval for several minutes more before it was quiet enough for Forester to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen of New York," Ian Forester began, his amplified voice booming across the skating rink, "in just a few short weeks, you will be going to the polls to vote in this year's mayoral primary for the candidate of your choice. Now, I could make you a lot of promises here today"—he smiled warmly into the television cameras—"but I won't. I think you all know me and I think you all know that in my over twenty years as a broadcaster in this great city, its problems and the problems of its people have been of the utmost concern to me. As your mayor, I can finally be in a position where I won't just *tell* you the news, but help to make it, instead!"

Forester paused as the crowd voiced its approval.

"He's really got the common folk in the palm of his hand," Peter shouted, trying to make himself heard over the applause and cheers.

Cindy nodded as she focused her camera, snapping several shots of a confident Ian Forester on the speaker's platform. "It's your basic charisma," she shouted back.

Peter began to answer, but before he could speak, his head was split with the dull, throbbing pain of his spider-sense blaring its warning of impending danger. Peter started, his hand going to his forehead to massage his throbbing temples. *Uh-oh! It's a sure thing my spider-sense isn't trying to tell me the Good Humor man just shortchanged a customer over a popsicle . . .*

Cindy Sayers glanced over at Peter. "Hey! What's the matter, *kimo sabe?"* she asked worriedly. "All of a sudden, you look like yesterday's oatmeal! You feeling all right?"

"Just . . . a headache," he replied, starting to move away from her through the thick crowd around them. "All this noise, y'know. Listen, cutie, you keep on taking pictures and I'll go look for an aspirin, okay?"

"Sure." Cindy's forehead was creased in thought as she watched Peter disappear, swallowed into the masses. *Now, what,* she thought, *was all* that *about?*

Were she to only follow the young photographer as he pushed his way into the concourse underneath Rockefeller Center, the answer would have been all too clear. For Peter made a bee-line for a deserted corridor around the corner from the entrance to the skating rink, pulling at the buttons of his shirt as he ran.

"YOU WERE WARNED, FORESTER!"

Ian Forester whirled suddenly on the platform, his smile changing quickly to an open-mouthed expression of horror as he faced the speaker of those words. The costumed figure was running toward the rear of the platform, the blank orbs of his eyes flashing in the noon sun as they fixed on the candidate.

"SPIDER-MAN!?"

The blue-and-red-clad figure clubbed a surprised police officer out of his path, tossing the limp, unconscious man at a group of onrushing security men. They caught the thrown body, the impact sending several thudding against the ground as they tried to support the man's dead weight. Then, without breaking stride, the phony Spider-Man leaped onto the speaker's platform before Forester, clutching at red, white, and blue bunting for support.

"That's right, old man!" the masked figure growled. "I told you I'd be back if you didn't drop out of this race!"

Forester took a step back, but the phony Spider-Man's gloved hand

streaked out, grasping the candidate by his tie and yanking the frightened man sharply toward him, nearly choking him in the process. “And this time, Forester,” he hissed, “you’re going to die!”

Several hundred feet beyond and above the now chaotic rink, the real Spider-Man watched the scene from his perch on the face of the Associated Press Building. *Give the little spider-sense a big cee-gar!* He pulled his hand away from the building’s façade and aimed his web-shooter at the building behind Forester and his own evil doppelganger.

Twip!

In seconds, the Web-slinger was arcing through the air, high over the heads of the stunned, silent crowd. Nobody took any notice of him, though. They all thought Spider-Man was already there!

Plainclothesman Bill Martin, his revolver in his hand, edged his way cautiously around the platform, moving ever so slowly to the masked intruder’s blind side. Then he raised his gun, sighting in on the silhouette of a spider on the costumed man’s back. If only he could get off one shot . . .

The gun flew out of his hand even as his finger tightened on the trigger, traveling straight up into the air rather than falling to the ground. Martin looked up, but all he saw was a dark blue and red streak flying through the air above his head, toward the speaker’s platform.

“What the . . . ?”

Spider-Man eyed the revolver trailing behind him on a thin strand of webbing with disgust. *Damned fool could’ve killed Forester a lot faster with that thing than my fake friend could with his hands! How come the cops in this town all think with their guns?*

With a muffled thud, the Web-slinger landed behind his double, who still clutched the struggling Forester in his hands, slowly twisting the very life from his throat.

“ ’Scuse me, handsome,” Spidey said. “I hate to cut in on your dance like this, but I just *had* to find out who makes those smashing threads for you.”

The other man turned, dropping Forester. “Who . . . ?”

“ME!”

Spider-Man lunged forward, grasping a handful of spider-web-patterned costume in his fist as he swung his double around, lifting the man off the floor. The crowd gasped and flashbulbs began bursting all around them, but Spider-Man’s attention was on the squirming man he held suspended in the air.

“Truth to tell, partner,” Spidey said through clenched teeth, “you’re

not much of a Spider-Man. But—and I can't emphasize this too strongly—if you don't say the right things to me when I start asking questions, you're going to be even *less* of one! Dig?"

"The boss told me I might be running into you, creep!" the other man answered. "I'm ready for you!"

"Really, chuckles?"

"Really!"

With that, the phony Spider-Man brought his hand up and shoved it toward his captor's face. Instead of a web-shooter at his wrist, this Spider-Man had a small nozzle that sprayed a cloud of yellow, noxious-smelling gas into the Web-slinger's face even as his captive kicked a booted foot into his stomach.

Spider-Man doubled over, sucking in a deep breath. *Blast! Didn't have time to hold my breath . . . not that it would've done much good after getting booted in the gut!*

The other man wrenched free of Spider-Man's grip, jumping back several yards to stay out of his reach. Spider-Man straightened, glaring at the mirror-image standing before him. *Strange . . . there must be a reason he gassed me, but darned if I can figure it out! That stuff may smell worse than New Jersey on a hot day, but it doesn't seem to have affected me! Well, that's his problem!*

At least it will be when I get my hands on him again!

Once more, Spider-Man lunged at his opponent, but this time the other sidestepped nimbly, avoiding the Web-slinger's grasp. Then he stepped in swiftly under Spidey's fists and landed a blow on the Wall-crawler's chin. Spidey's head snapped back and he staggered slightly, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. *Whew! Chuckles, here, is a lot faster and stronger than I thought. Maybe he got bitten by a radioactive rat when he was younger!*

A uniformed policeman raced with several others onto the speaker's platform, surrounding the still-dazed Ian Forester with a circle of blue uniforms. His partner stood beside him, watching the struggle between the two Spider-Men with a puzzled expression on his face. He gestured helplessly with his revolver. "Jeez, Sarge," he whispered to the man next to him, "shouldn't we do *something?"*

"What, O'Reilly? We don't even know which one of those guys is which!"

"Yeah, but ain't the *real* Spider-Man wanted?"

"Forget it, Patrolman," the sargeant said testily. "I don't care *what* the D.A. says about Spider-Man! He's done a hell of a lot to help us over the years, and as far as *I'm* concerned, he's okay!"

But the Web-slinger was not okay at that moment. His criminal

counterpart landed another blow to his face, sending him reeling backward and through the wooden railing at the front of the speaker's platform. Spider-Man hit the ground with a sickening thud, but was on his feet again in mere seconds.

Something is not quite right!

Spidey pulled himself back up onto the platform in time to see the other man leap to the ground on the opposite side. With a single, incredible leap calculated to carry him over the platform and onto the back of his fleeing foe, Spider-Man sprang forward . . .

. . . and tumbled awkwardly to the poured-concrete floor of the skating rink, far short of his goal!

Lord! What's the matter with me today!? I'm performing like somebody with two left feet, not to mention two left hands!

He scrambled to his feet, trying to keep his eyes on the colorfully garbed figure racing desperately through the crowd.

Can't use my webbing to glom him . . . too many people in the way!

Instead, he fired his webbing at the bronze railing surrounding the sunken rink, and pulled himself up over the crowd to street level. He raced around to the stairs his double had taken, planting himself in the on-rushing man's path.

"Hi, there! Remember me?"

The fake Spider-Man did not break stride as he hunched down, head lowered like a football player, and barreled into the costumed youth. Spidey fell back, landing on his backside with a spine-jarring *plop!* His evil double kept on running past the fallen form, then headed up Fiftieth Street toward Sixth Avenue. Spider-Man scrambled to his feet and shot a strand of webbing at the fleeing man's legs, entangling them in the thick, sticky chemical substance.

Crunch!

He went down, cracking his jaw on the littered pavement, and before he could even look over his shoulder, Spider-Man was on him. The Web-slinger yanked his double to his feet, pulling back his right fist menacingly.

"Game's over, handsome," he said lightly. "Score's Spider-Man: ten —Spider-Man: zero! *You* figure out which is which!"

"NO!"

The fake Spidey threw himself backward tearing free once more from the other's grasp. A right cross sent Spider-Man tumbling in the opposite direction, dazed and more than a little startled. *Sonovagun!* He shook off the effects of the blow and swung his fist at his opponent, who easily ducked under it. Then the other man straightened suddenly, butting his head into the masked hero's chest.

“Wooof!” The breath exploded from Spidey’s lungs, and this time it took him several seconds before his vision had cleared sufficiently to resume the chase.

The ersatz Spider-Man ran across Rockefeller Plaza, crossing in front of a car as it screeched to a stop, narrowly avoiding hitting the colorfully garbed felon. He glanced but once over his shoulder, making sure the Wall-crawler was still following him up Fiftieth Street. The impostor smiled beneath his mask.

But even as Spider-Man ran, his lungs beginning to ache from the exertion, he knew he was in trouble! *That blasted gas . . . that’s got to be it! Some kind of nerve gas to slow up my reflexes, weaken me enough to even up the odds for handsome, there!*

Spider-Man pushed roughly past a hot-dog vendor’s stand being rolled up the street, never taking his eyes from the figure just ahead. *I can’t afford to try and take him one on one . . . not pumped full of this toxin! Still, I’ve got my webbing* . . . He aimed his web-shooters at the fleeing man. His middle fingers curled to touch the hidden buttons in his palms.

And the phony Spider-Man ducked into the RCA Building.

Eleven

Fahthwhoooosh!

A small ball of fire and black smoke exploded mere inches from Spider-Man's eyes as he came charging through the revolving doors that led into 30 Rockefeller Center. His double stood in the middle of the rapidly clearing lobby, preparing to throw another small, square object at the Web-slinger. Spidey fired a line of webbing over his head at the ornate ceiling, and pulled himself straight up, over the second exploding object.

"Tug McGraw you *ain't,* handsome," he murmured. He swung himself through the air on the webbing, propelling himself to the lobby's far wall, where he clung like a giant spider. But the fake Spider-Man no longer seemed to be interested in his opponent as he sprinted for the bank of elevators which led to the uppermost floors of the building. Spider-Man fired his webbing after the fleeing figure, but the chemical substance splattered harmlessly against the closing elevator doors.

Spider-Man cursed softly beneath his mask as he leaped from his perch on the wall to the floor. He landed unsteadily, his sense of balance still impaired by the mysterious gas that had invaded his nervous system.

Each bank of elevators in the New York headquarters of NBC Television were watched over by a building security guard whose job it was to make sure visitors did indeed have appointments on the floors above and that those who did not never made it past the lobby. Tourists and the curious were easy for them to handle. Costumed superheroes who ripped open steel elevator doors like tissue paper

were not! Thus, the awe-struck guard at this bank of elevators stood open-mouthed and staring as Spider-Man did just that before leaping into the dark, empty shaft.

Hand over hand, Spider-Man climbed the greasy steel cable, moving faster than the mechanism which ran the elevator toward the top of the shaft. He strained his ears, listening for the sound of the elevator in the next shaft which carried his costumed imitator. It continued nonstop toward the top of the building.

Moments later, Spider-Man reached the double steel doors at the top of the shaft. The other elevator was several floors below, but still rising to the top. Spider-Man leaped from the cable, his feet adhering to the wall of the shaft beside the door. He forced his gloved fingers into the rack between the two doors and pulled, his teeth grinding together with the effort. *This was a heck of a lot easier downstairs. The nerve gas must have a progressive effect based on the amount of exertion I expend.*

With a loud, metallic meshing of gears, the doors began to give way under Spider-Man's efforts. "C'mon baby," he urged himself on under his breath. "You can do it!" *At least, that's what it says in my official bio!*

Finally, the twin doors opened and Spider-Man tumbled out of the shaft onto a plushly carpeted floor. A woman screamed.

Spider-Man rose groggily to his feet. *Whew! That took a lot out of me . . . maybe too much! Still, the gas doesn't seem to be lethal, just damned annoying!* For the first time, the Web-slinger looked at his new surroundings. He was standing by a wooden podium next to the bank of elevators. Behind the podium stood a startled man in a tuxedo. A cloakroom was off to one side, and the woman who had screamed at his appearance stood there, letting her mink jacket trail on the floor. Through an entrance opposite the elevators, Spider-Man could hear the clink of silverware against china and the subdued murmur of many people.

"H-have you a . . . reservation, sir?" That from the tuxedoed man.

"A *what?"*

The man in the tuxedo was taken aback. "A-a r-reservation, sir," he stammered. "Diners *must* have a . . ."

Spider-Man turned his eyes back to the second elevator door. "Do *I* look like a diner?"

"Well, sir, it is not my place to comment on the dress of the Rainbow Grill's clientele, although a tie is generally . . ."

"Sorry, friend. All my ties clash with this outfit."

The light beside the elevator blinked on with a low pinging sound as the doors slid smoothly open. Spider-Man braced himself, ready to

envelop his phony opponent in a cocoon of unbreakable webbing the instant he stepped from the elevator.

The car was empty.

Spider-Man stepped cautiously into the vacant elevator, his eyes narrowed behind the blank two-way mirrors in his mask. *It just can't be! This is the only floor the elevator stopped on, and the trap-door in the ceiling hasn't been opened in weeks, judging by the dust around it.*

Jeez! I never realized I was fighting Houdini!

The Web-slinger's thoughts were suddenly interrupted. From the restaurant beyond the bank of elevators, he heard the loud, booming laughter, like the echoing of a cannon blast, of a voice he knew all too well from his past. The disappearance of his doppelgänger forgotten, Spidey ran from the elevator car, pushing past the tuxedoed maitre d', who thought he should at least investigate the unseemly appearance of this strange man in *his* restaurant.

The Rainbow Grill atop 30 Rockefeller Center was one of New York's finest and more well-known eating establishments. Overlooking midtown Manhattan, this rather exclusive restaurant offered diners a superb view of the city through the all-glass picture windows that surrounded the circular room. It was from a corner of the dining room, against one of the windows, that that booming laughter originated.

The laughter of the Kingpin.

Opposite him sat his wife, radiant in an all-white jumpsuit, her regal face as bright as the summer sun. She laughed easily with the barrel-bodied man who was her husband, the fears and uncertainties she felt about her life at least momentarily forgotten in the joys of the day. So *this* is what it was like for a normal couple to enjoy each other's company without fear of attack.

Spider-Man stood at the entrance to the restaurant, staring in wonder at the couple across the room. The other diners in the room stopped talking suddenly at the sight of the dark blue-and-red-clad man, but he took no notice of them, just as Kingpin and Vanessa seemed oblivious to his presence. The Web-crawler would soon change that.

"Well, well, well," he called, "if it isn't Mr. and Mrs. America!"

Kingpin turned from his steak, the smile on his fat face slowly fading as he caught sight of the costumed figure across the room. Vanessa paled, her now-trembling hand reaching across the table to rest on her husband's arm. "Please, husband," she whispered in an unsteady voice, "not again . . . not *now!"*

The master criminal rose, facing his foe. "We have no reason to

engage in battle, my dear," he said to her.

"What do you want of me, Spider-Man?"

The other diners turned as one toward Spider-Man, breathlessly waiting for him to reply. Many people had already recognized the fat man, and the word was passed in hushed, tense whispers to the others. They knew what must come next.

"Just your hide, fat man," the Wall-crawler answered casually.

Kingpin spread his massive hands before him in a gesture of noncomprehension. "Why? What law have I broken to arouse your ire *this* time?"

"Hows about impersonating a human being, for starters?"

With those words Spider-Man charged across the room past panicking men and women who realized they were quite suddenly in the middle of what was to become a raging battleground. Kingpin made no other move than to pull his wife from her seat. "Go!" he hissed.

"But what of you, my darling?"

"I shall take care of the web-spinning idiot, Vanessa, and join you at our apartment later, hmmm? Now, please, I think it would be best if you were not here to witness this." His tiny, piggish eyes glinted at Spider-Man. "It shall be most unpleasant."

With a muffled sob, Vanessa ran from the table. Oh, Lord, she sobbed silently, when would they leave them to live their lives together in peace?

Spider-Man leaped through the air, over tables and chairs, landing with his legs wrapped around the Kingpin's waist. His gloved hands went to Kingpin's squat, almost nonexistent throat, applying as much pressure as possible to the big man's carotid artery. Kingpin grunted as he wedged his hands between himself and Spider-Man and pushed mightily. Still weakened and groggy from the gas. Spidey lost his hold, giving Kingpin the opportunity to smash a sledgehammer-like fist into his chest. The Web-slinger rolled with the blow as best he could, pirouetting away from Kingpin on the balls of his feet.

Kingpin stood with feet spread, arms hanging at his sides, ready for the next attack. "Then this is how it is to be, Spider-Man?"

"Quit playing stupid with me, porky," Spidey said. "I don't particularly care why you're trying to set me up for a fall with your own, personal Spider-Man flunky doing the dirty work, but . . ."

"Talk sense, man!" Kingpin said, his face registering genuine confusion at Spider-Man's words.

"C'mon, clothespin, we *both* know you're behind the attacks on Ian Forester! Your second-rate super-hero led me right into your rather

pudgy lap."

"My . . . ?"

"You should've been an actor, cuddles. That way you'd've been up for an Academy Award for this performance instead of a long jail sentence."

Spider-Man rushed forward, his arms outstretched before him to grab the Kingpin's lapels, but the big man, his reflexes unclouded by any substance, was faster. He grasped Spider-Man by the wrists, his hands encircling the twin web-shooters concealed beneath the Wall-crawler's gloves, and began to squeeze. Spidey yapped in pain involuntarily as he felt the lightweight metal twist and break under the Kingpin's powerful hold, the jagged edges pressing into his wrist.

Scratch two web-shooters . . . not to mention my wrists!

Spider-Man gritted his teeth, trying to pull free of the bone-crushing hold. But the master criminal was too powerful for the drugged hero. Instead, Spider-Man threw his own 180 pounds back, momentarily upsetting the Kingpin's balance. He toppled backward, falling into a smooth, practiced somersault. And before the Kingpin could release his grasp, he fell with Spider-Man, who propelled the fat man over his head with his feet. The floor of the restaurant fairly shuddered as more than a quarter of a ton of flesh and bone slammed to the ground.

"The bigger they are, hey, fats?"

With a speed and agility that never failed to amaze the Web-slinger, Kingpin sprang immediately to his feet. His small, cruel features were set in an expression of hate. "You miserable insect!" he roared.

"Flattery, if you'll pardon two clichés in a row, will get you everywhere, Kingy!"

Got to keep him angry so he doesn't get a chance to plan any strategy. In my condition, I doubt if I could take Bozo the Clown, let alone New York Fats!

Spider-Man was correct. The Kingpin of New York crime was far too angered by this attack to bother forming any battle plans. But for a man who possessed the strength of a runaway locomotive, skill and finesse were not always necessary in a fight—not when he could simply lumber forward, grasp his opponent by neck and crotch before the other could react, lift him like a rag doll over his head, and heave him through a plate-glass window, hundreds of feet above the concrete pavement of New York.

Twelve

Spider-Man sailed through the Rainbow Grill's glass wall almost as if it were not there. His hand shot out, feeling desperately for the side of the building, just inches out of his reach. He fell with a shower of glass slivers raining around him, his body twisting awkwardly through the air.

Frantically, he pressed the concealed buttons in his palms, but instead of a controlled strand of life-saving webbing, all he got was the fluid leaking into his hands from the shattered cartridges on his wrists.

He plunged headlong toward the street below, faster and faster with each second, the ground rushing up to meet him. Spider-Man twisted his body in the air, maneuvering himself now. There was no panic left in him, no thought, as instincts honed to a fine edge through years of battling for survival took over. Below him, slightly off to his right, a flagpole jutted from the fifth floor of the building, and it was that which he aimed for. Like a parachutist in free fall, he used his arms and legs to control his direction, bending his body in an effort to slow his speed.

The flagpole rushed up to meet him, and at the last possible second he straightened, his left hand reaching out to grasp the pole as he streaked by. His fingers closed around it and, with a spine-wrenching jerk, he stopped his headlong plummet to death. But this respite was only temporary, as Spider-Man felt his left arm yank loose from its socket with the sudden force. Before he could bring his right hand up

to reinforce his hold, his numbed fingers gave way.

His left arm dangling uselessly at his side, he dropped again. But this time, less than thirty feet below him, was the overhang of the RCA Building's front entrance on Fiftieth Street. He landed on his feet on the canopy's edge, his legs flexing at the last moment to absorb the impact of landing. He tottered at the edge for several seconds, unable to use his dislocated left arm to regain his balance. He fell the final dozen feet to the sidewalk, but even before he landed in a crumpled heap, unconsciousness claimed the youth called Spider-Man.

The blackness before Spider-Man's eyes began to disintegrate. First, tiny pinpoints of light pierced the dark veil, expanding slowly into muddy gray and white patches. Then, rich pastel colors swirled into his vision, settling finally into a hazy view of the scene around him. He was in a small, partitioned-off section of a hospital emergency room, lying on his back on an examination table. He brought his hand quickly to his face, feeling the thick material of his mask beneath his fingers.

"Don't worry, son, I didn't peek."

Spider-Man tried to raise himself on his elbows to face the speaker and he winced in pain as he put his weight on his left arm. "Here now, lad," the voice said quickly, "you'd better watch that arm of yours. Let me help you." He felt strong hands brace his back, lowering him to the table.

The speaker stepped around into Spider-Man's line of vision. He was a craggy-faced man, in his late forties probably, but his freckled, weather-beaten face made him look older. His hair was shocking red, connoting an obvious Irish heritage, a fact backed by the small name plate on his white doctor's smock: LIAM O'CONNOR, M.D. He smiled pleasantly at Spider-Man.

"How're you feeling, son?"

"H-how did I get here?"

"Now, now. We'll answer *my* questions first and then yours, all right?"

Despite his weariness, Spider-Man smiled. "You're the doc."

"That's true. Now, how do you feel?"

"Fine." *Considering I just fell a couple dozen stories from the top of the RCA Building.*

"Double vision? Headache? Any problems at all?"

"Just my arm, Doc. Did I break it?"

Dr. O'Connor shook his head. "No, lad, but you have dislocated it. I took X rays and it should be as good as new in about a week,

provided, of course, you take it easy." He laughed. "I don't suppose you do much of *that,* do you?"

"Not very much, no," the Web-slinger admitted. "You're certainly pretty cool about having a superhero stretched out on your examination table, Doc."

O'Connor waved this aside, smiling. "Son, I've been practicing medicine in this city for twenty-two years now. Do you honestly think there's anything left out there that'll surprise me after that?"

"I concede the point." Spider-Man sat up, careful to keep his weight off his bad arm. It didn't hurt as long as it was not jarred. In fact, his shoulder was pretty much numb to all sensation. Novocaine, he guessed. *I'm in for some real, honest-to-goodness hurting when that wears off.* "Not to change the subject, Doc, but would you mind telling me who brought me in here? In fact, would you mind telling me where 'here' is?"

"Of course. You're in Roosevelt Hospital. As to who brought you here, I'm not sure I got her name."

"Her?"

The doctor nodded. "Beautiful woman," he said wistfully. "She's waiting outside to talk to you, I believe. Would you like me to send her in?"

"Are you kidding, Doc? A beautiful woman? I may be able to crawl up walls, but don't let the costume fool you. I ain't crazy!"

O'Connor laughed, shaking his head in wonder. He pulled aside a curtain and left Spider-Man alone in the small examination room. Spidey took the opportunity to slide off the table, gingerly testing to see if his legs would hold his weight. They did. *Mr. Parker, either somebody up there likes you a whole heck of a lot, or you're the luckiest hero since Dick Tracy married Tess Truehart. Hubba-hubba.*

The curtain behind the head of the examination table opened again and the woman entered. She was beautiful, all right.

She was also the Kingpin's wife.

Behind his mask, Spider-Man gaped in undisguised astonishment. But Vanessa did not see that very human expression cross this bizarrely garbed creature's face; rather, she saw the immobile façade of the web-patterned mask. It looked as eerie, as frightening, as it always had to her. It was the face that invaded her dreams, reminding her constantly of the humiliation and defeat her beloved husband had suffered at Spider-Man's hands.

Spider-Man recovered his voice. "Er . . . I think I owe you a heap-load of thanks, lady."

"No." Her voice was a barely audible whisper. "I did not do what I

did for thanks, Spider-Man. You were hurt, nearly killed, by my husband's hand. I-I could not leave you there, possibly to die . . .

"My husband has garnered more than enough of his share of sins in his lifetime. I could not add your death to that list."

"Fair enough." Spider-Man knew what emotions this woman must feel for him, her husband's archnemesis. "But that doesn't change anything between me and Kingpin. He's involved in something and I aim to stop him if I can."

"You always have in the past," she said. "That is why I am asking you *not* to this time."

"What?"

"He has sworn to me this will be his last operation," she pleaded. "He would not lie, not to me! But he is a proud man, Spider-Man, prouder than you can ever know. Do you know what defeat does to a proud man? It makes him bitter, yearning for revenge."

"I don't see what that . . ."

"Don't you see? It can never end that way. It just goes on and on and on until there is no longer a man left, but merely an embittered shell who can do nothing but plot and scheme his way into insanity."

"But he's breaking the law! I can't let him get away with it."

"Why not? Has God appointed you as the final arbitrator in such matters?"

Spider-Man shrugged. "It's what I do."

"Then I cannot change your mind," she said at length, turning to leave. She stopped short of the curtain, turning to face Spider-Man again. "You are more like him than you think, Spider-Man. Could that be why you hate him so?"

"I don't hate him," he said softly. "It's the game we've both chosen to play. Neither of us can change the rules. That's the way it is."

Vanessa's eyes filled. "As you say," she said, her voice choking with emotion. "Fair enough."

She swept aside the curtain.

"Hey, Vanessa!"

She stopped, not turning.

"You're a hell of a good woman. The Kingpin's a lucky man."

Her shoulders heaved slightly as she swallowed a sob. And then she was gone.

Thirteen

Dr. O'Connor walked back into the examination room, a look of confusion on his weather-beaten face. Spider-Man was in the middle of the small room, his head slightly bowed.

"Spider-Man?"

The Web-slinger looked up. "Oh, sorry, Doc. Guess I kind of lost my way there for a second."

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Oh, yeah. It's just that something pretty heavy just went down in here. Gave me something to think about."

"I know. I saw the lady leave. She was crying."

Spider-Man merely nodded. O'Connor was not a particularly curious man in matters other than medical, but now, standing with this man, he wished he could see through the thick material of his mask for some clue to an emotion. What sort of man *was* this, anyway? No, he corrected himself, this so-called Spider-Man was just barely a man at that, at least chronologically. He could tell that much about the boy from his examination. Dr. O'Connor sighed mentally. He was almost sorry he had resisted temptation and hadn't looked at the face beneath the mask—just to see what such a person looks like.

"Say, Doc, you, uh . . . didn't happen to notice any gents in blue suits out there looking for anybody fitting my general description, did you?"

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Police?"

"Yeah. They tend to take exception to my work habits from time to time, and to tell the truth, I don't feel like hassling with them right now."

"So I've heard. No, there were no police that I saw." He went over to a cabinet and rummaged around for a few seconds before pulling out a canvas sling. "Here," he said. "Let me help you on with this. It's best to keep that arm immobile as much as possible."

With the doctor's help, Spider-Man got into the sling. It wrapped around his left shoulder and across his chest, keeping the bad arm tightly strapped across the spider-emblem on the front of his costume.

"The local anesthetic I gave you for the pain should hold for another hour or so, and if it's too painful after that, I can order something else for you."

"Sorry, Doc, I can't hang around here that long, if you'll pardon the pun. I've got felons to catch."

"You don't understand, son. I'm checking you into the hospital. You've done some damage to that shoulder, and I want to keep an eye on it for a day or so." The doctor turned, reaching for a clipboard on top of a medicine cabinet. "I've arranged for a private room in a nearly deserted wing. You won't be disturbed."

But when Liam O'Connor, M.D., turned back to face his patient, he was gone.

The gentle flapping of the curtains was the only evidence Spider-Man had ever been there.

I hated to cut out on the doc like that, but I haven't got the time to play Dr. Kildare reruns.

Spider-Man climbed slower than usual up the wall of his Chelsea apartment building, slightly hampered by his dislocated left shoulder. It hadn't been until he was outside the hospital that he remembered his web-shooters were useless, smashed by the Kingpin, making transportation home more difficult.

But not impossible!

He had merely leaped onto the roof of a Chelsea-bound commuter bus and rode home clinging by his toes and fingers.

He perched on the sill outside his bedroom window, which he kept unlocked for just such an occasion. *I wonder how the other tenants would react if Spidey sauntered in through the lobby, stopping to pick up his mail, nodding good morning to old Mrs. Muggins and her gift-leaving poodle.*

He lifted the window and stepped inside, pulling off his mask with a sigh of relief. His face was pale, slightly drawn from the events of the

day. *I could use about three weeks of sleep.* He gingerly unstrapped his arm and peeled off his costume, pulling on a tattered terry-cloth robe. Already, his shoulder was beginning to throb with a low, dull ache. *Remember, smiley, it gets worse before it gets better. Ouch!*

Peter Parker pulled open the bedroom door that led into his rather eclectically furnished living room. There, seated at his Salvation Army Original desk, was Cindy Sayers, intently reading through something from one of the drawers.

"Cindy?"

She yelped at the sound of his voice, knocking over the chair as she jumped to her feet. "Peter!" she gasped. "What're you doing here?"

He smiled wearily. "I do believe that's *my* line, pretty lady."

"I-I was waiting for you," she replied quickly. "After you disappeared from Rockefeller Center, I figured you'd head back here eventually. Your . . . uh . . . landlady let me in."

She surreptitiously pushed the desk drawer closed with her backside before walking over to Peter and putting her arms around his neck. "You look awful. Where'd you . . . ?" She stopped, her forehead wrinkled in sudden thought. "Hey, how'd you get in here, anyway? When I got here I knocked and nobody answered, and this apartment isn't so big that you could've sneaked by me."

"Would you believe I came in through the bedroom window?"

"No."

"How about, I was asleep and didn't hear the door?"

"Better."

"Glad you like it. Explanations while you wait, y'know."

"In that case, sir, how about one to cover your disappearing act this afternoon. A girl just hates being left out in the cold like that."

"It's gotta be in the seventies out there! Anyway, I was searching around for an aspirin for this headache of mine when Spider-Man showed up. I took off after him to get some pix for kindly, old Uncle Jonah."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Get pictures, dodo."

"Nope. By the time I got a fresh roll of film into my camera, they'd both split." He shrugged his shoulders and immediately regretted it. He grimaced in pain.

"What's the matter, handsome?"

"Nothing much," he muttered without thinking. "I must've sprained my shoulder."

"You, too, huh?"

"Translation, please," he said, feigning ignorance. *That's real clever, motor-mouth! A couple more slips like that and my secret identity'll be worth about as much as one of Jolly Jonah Jameson's cigars!*

"You *have* been asleep! Spider-Man nearly ripped his arm out of its socket when he saved himself from a several-hundred-foot fall."

"Sounds impressive. Is he okay?"

"Uh-huh. A doctor at Roosevelt Hospital treated him for a dislocated shoulder."

"Do tell?"

"I do." Cindy smiled mischievously. "And it was a dislocated *left* shoulder."

Uh-oh!

"You know me," Peter said. "I can't resist following every old trend that comes along. I even had a Nehru jacket."

"Do I detect a note of evasiveness there?"

"No, what you detect is a whole symphony of exhaustion."

"Can't take the pace, eh?"

"Well, some young lady, whose name I'm too much of a gentleman to mention, has been forcing me to keep some pretty late hours these nights. And this growing boy needs his sleep!"

Cindy growled and kissed him. "Okay, lover. I'll let you get your sleepy-bye. But we've got a date for the morning!"

Peter stood by his front door, watching Cindy walk down the stairs. *Am I just getting paranoid, or does that lovely lady really suspect something?*

And can I stay awake long enough to figure it out?

He couldn't.

Cindy Sayers deposited a dime in the telephone in the booth down the street from Peter's apartment. She dialed a number and stood waiting through half a dozen rings, her foot tapping impatiently on the ground.

"Hello?"

"This is Cindy."

"Where the blazes have you been? I've been trying for the past two hours to get in touch with you."

"I've been doing what you're paying me for, Mister! I've been checking out Peter."

The gruff voice on the other end of the line sounded interested now.

“And?”

Cindy closed her eyes as she spoke, massaging the bridge of her nose between her fingers. “Nothing. When Spider-Man showed up at the Forester rally, Peter took off. I don’t know where he went.”

“So you didn’t actually *see* it, then?”

“No. Like I said, I have no idea where he went.”

“Damn!” Cindy could hear the man slam his fist against a desktop over the wire. “That punk’s hiding something!”

“I don’t think so. I went through his desk while I thought he was out and didn’t find anything. Besides, he walked in on me while I was going through his stuff and didn’t even notice. That doesn’t sound to me like somebody who’s trying to hide something.”

“Maybe not, but I’m still not convinced.”

“But . . .”

“Need I remind you of who’s paying the bills, Ms. Sayers?”

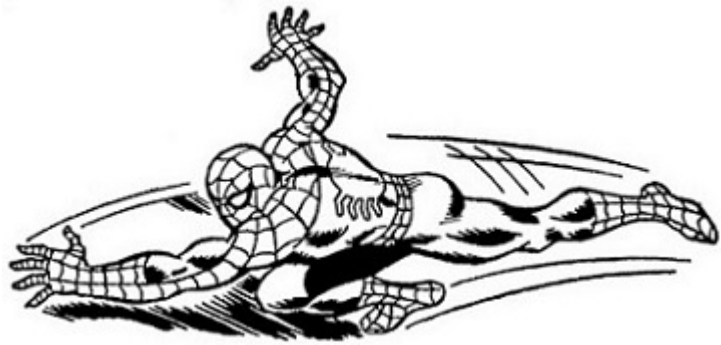
“I think you’re wasting your money.”

“It’s mine to waste, my dear. I suggest you carry on, and I’ll let you know when I’m tired of throwing it away.”

“I’ll keep in touch.”

Cindy returned the phone to its cradle and stood for long moments in the phone booth, staring intently at nothing.

“Lady, how *do* you get involved in these things?” she asked herself aloud.



Fourteen

The seven crime bosses of New York sat waiting patiently, for the most part, in the oaken-paneled conference room in the Kingpin's waterfront hideout. All but the tall, silver-haired man named Silvermane was in his appointed seat. He paced back and forth across the plush carpeting, his eyes blazing in anger.

"I don't like this," he said. "I don't like being ordered around by the Kingpin like some peon! What right does he have to demand our presence at such short notice?"

"Be cool, man." Alim Nassor calmly dug under his fingernails with a penknife as he spoke. "We all agreed Kingpin was runnin' this show from the start. Why you suddenly gettin' so uptight?"

Silvermane stood behind his chair at the foot of the table, glaring at the tall black man. "Because, Nassor, unlike you, I'm used to running my business as my own! I've never needed another man to tell me what needs to be done."

Nassor looked up from his nails, a flat, humorless smile on his lips. " 'At's true, man. Hell, I'll bet you didn't even need anybody else to tell you to let Spider-Man beat you spitless, right?"

Silvermane started to reply, but Milo Milkerstein held up a hand, cutting him off. "Gentlemen, please!" the old man pleaded. "What percentage is there in fighting amongst ourselves, hmmm? We are, after all, part of the same team."

"Are we? I wonder, old friend."

Every head in the room turned at the sound of the deep, rich voice from the doorway. The Kingpin, when he was sure all eyes were on him, closed the double doors behind himself, then walked over to the long conference table to take his seat.

"What the hell are—"

"Quiet, Silvermane," the fat man demanded. And, despite himself, Silvermane complied. "I did not ask you here to listen to you rant."

"Then why, *amigo?"* Emmanuel Cortez asked.

The Kingpin leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands over his ample stomach. "You have, no doubt, heard of my run-in with Spider-Man yesterday, gentlemen."

There were nods around the table.

"What I wish to discover is the reason for that attack."

Lawrence Hilderbrant's face registered confusion. "How're we supposed to know, Kingpin?"

"Because the blasted Wall-crawler knew exactly where to find me. Because he attacked me, unprovoked, in public. Because he spoke as if he knew our plan.

"Need I go on?"

Carlo Tommasti narrowed his eyes at the Kingpin. "Are you saying one of us is in league with Spider-Man?"

Kingpin fixed a beady-eyed glare on Silvermane, seated across the table from him. "Yes."

"You're crazy, Kingpin." Silvermane held the fat man's stare, refusing to allow himself to be beaten down.

"Perhaps. But I am not wrong about this. It is the only logical explanation for Spider-Man's actions."

"Man, why would any of us want to screw up this deal? There's a lot of bread to be made by ownin' the mayor of this city."

"That is precisely what I wish to find out, Mr. Nassor, along with the identity and reasons behind the fake Spider-Man who has been harassing Ian Forester. Any ideas, Silvermane?"

"Only that you're trying to pin this on *me,* Kingpin," the silver-haired crime boss said through clenched teeth.

"Quite the contrary, my friend," Kingpin assured the other man with a smile. "However, you do seem quick to take the offensive, don't you?"

Silvermane looked at the faces of the other six men seated around the long table. How many of them could he count on to back him? he wondered. But their impassive faces gave no clue to their loyalties.

"You're speculating, Kingpin."

"Am I?"

"Dammit!" Silvermane pounded his fist on the table-top. "If you're accusing me of something, Kingpin, you'd better just say it and quit beating around the bush."

The Kingpin leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “It is no secret that you do not like me, Silvermane. We’ve spent far too many years fighting over territorial matters for there ever to be any love lost between the two of us. But that does not bother me.” He chuckled. “We are, after all, merely business partners, not lovers. What does bother me, however, is having a partner in a venture whom I cannot completely trust.”

“Maybe you’d like it better if I wasn’t your partner, then.”

New York’s most powerful criminal chief shook his head. “I prefer to have you where I can keep an eye on you, Silvermane.”

Mr. Soo, head of the Chinatown crime organization, spoke up for the first time. “You have neglected to give us a motive for Silvermane’s alleged treachery, Kingpin.”

“Isn’t it obvious, Soo? He thinks I want to get rid of him so I can take over his operations in the city.”

Kingpin inclined his head in Silvermane’s direction. “As you say, Silvermane.”

The huge man rose from the leather chair at the head of the table. “That is all, gentlemen. I merely wished to point out the difficulties we have been encountering in this endeavor and mention the fact that I am fully aware of the situation.

“Thank you.”

The seven crime bosses filed out of the conference room, each deep in his own thoughts. Every man at that meeting knew that, very soon, they would be called upon to make a choice between the two top criminal organizations’ masters. Not one of them knew for certain how he would vote.

Kingpin remained behind, locking himself in the conference room and settling down with a snifter of brandy to thoughts of his future plans.

No, that was not quite right. Rather, the master criminal’s thoughts were centered on one man, perhaps the only man among all the organized family bosses who even came close to rivaling Kingpin in criminal genius.

Silvermane.

He was not small-time, not like the others: Nassor, Tommasti, Soo, even Hilderbrant, the playboy-crook. Each had carved his individual little kingdom out of the highly profitable New York territories, and each was content with what little he had. But not Silvermane; he was greedy and, worse, smart—smart enough to know the Kingpin had to be gotten rid of before he could lay claim to the whole damned city, and probably half the suburbs, as well.

All Kingpin country.

No longer was Silvermane merely a potential threat to the Kingpin and the future of the operation. He had demonstrated his willingness to destroy all of the Kingpin's carefully wrought plans by interfering with the Ian Forester campaign. No doubt he somehow led Spider-Man to the restaurant to plague him, as well. He was an accident waiting to happen. The big man was convinced of that now. He had seen Silvermane's hatred for him overshadow his desire to be at least part-owner of the biggest city in the nation.

The Kingpin sighed. He had hoped he would not have to deviate from his set plans so early in the campaign, but circumstances undeniably warranted it, whether the crime boss wished it or not. If Silvermane was allowed to continue, any hope of getting Forester elected as their puppet-mayor would vanish. The Kingpin could not allow that, not with so much of his life dependent on the outcome. Yes, Silvermane would have to be removed from the picture far sooner than Kingpin had originally anticipated.

And the Kingpin knew of only one method for disposing of troublesome people.

Silvermane did not know it yet, but he was a dead man.

A sparkling, silver 1936 Rolls-Royce White Phantom glided smoothly onto the Long Island Expressway, its chauffeur maneuvering expertly through the relatively light afternoon traffic. The other cars gave this mint-condition classic automobile ample room, most drivers preferring to stay back aways and just admire the lustrous beauty of its sleek chassis. It gleamed like real silver.

In point of fact, it *was* genuine silver, for its owner would settle for no less. Silvermane was eccentric that way.

The crime boss sat nestled in the plush, silvery cushions of the back seat, lost in deep contemplation. It was obvious the Kingpin knew. Maybe not the hows or the whats, but certainly the whys! Of course, Silvermane had expected Kingpin would catch on eventually. After all, they both knew none of the others would have the nerve to make such attempts on the Kingpin's throne.

Silvermane would have to move very carefully from now on. A single slip-up, and he would be lost instead of the Kingpin. But there would be no slip-ups. Everything was perfect.

And before it was over, the Kingpin would be no more.

Fifteen

Ian Forester wearily said good night to the uniformed police officer outside the door to his Central Park West apartment. Since the second attack the day before, his personal force of bodyguards had almost doubled in strength. He had refused, on orders from the Kingpin, to cease, or at least limit, his numerous public appearances, but the police feared to let him go to the corner newsstand without a phalanx of guards. In fact, they much preferred to send an officer out for the paper.

But even had the Kingpin not instructed him to go on as he had been doing, Ian Forester would still have been out campaigning just as vigorously. He didn't particularly care to be mayor, but with the life of his darling Amy at stake, he would fight like a madman for the job!

His wife Rochelle came from upstairs at the sound of the door closing. Forester thought she looked very pretty, almost girlish, dressed in blue jeans and a faded workshirt. And, for a few seconds at least, he forgot his worries and fears and kissed the woman who had been his wife for almost thirty years.

"How'd it go today, honey?" Her eyes were outlined in red, a result, Forester knew, coming back to reality with a jolt, of many sleepless nights and crying.

"Fine," he breathed. "At least nobody took a swing at me, if that's what you mean." He forced a smile. "Don't let anybody fool you, kid. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. I think I've talked with more

reporters in the last week and a half than I have in over thirty years' worth of broadcasters' conventions. Some of them reporter fellers can get pretty hostile, too."

"They're just jealous."

Forester pulled away from his wife's embrace, laughing bitterly. "Of what, Rochelle?"

"Oh." Rochelle Forester turned her back to Forester, her hand flying to her mouth. "I-I almost forgot for a second, Ian," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "I thought we . . . we were still a normal family. I forgot all about Amy's . . ." Her voice cracked and the tears flowed down her cheeks.

Forester gathered her tenderly in his arms. "Lord, Shelly, honey! I'm sorry, love. It's just that . . . that everything's going so fast and I'm working so hard," he said quickly, soothingly. "Sometimes it just seems so hopeless. I'm so powerless in this situation that I just . . ."

"Don't say that, Ian," she said quietly. "I don't think I could be strong if you weren't."

They held each other for long minutes, each gathering strength from the presence of the other.

"Are the kids home?" he asked at length.

She shook her head, composing herself. "Liza's staying at a friend's and Johnny's at the library, studying. Both of them wanted to get away from the reporters for a while."

"Can't say I blame them. I wish I had a library to hide in."

Rochelle walked over to the bar, which had been replaced, courtesy of the Kingpin, the day after his demonstration, and began fixing her husband a drink. "Ian?"

"Liza asked me about Amy this morning," she said, not looking up from her work. "She wondered why we haven't gotten a postcard or something from her in so long. She was writing pretty regularly before she . . . before."

Forester ran a hand through his hair. "That girl's too smart for her own good."

"She's a woman, Ian, a college graduate. She's worried about her kid sister. And that's not an answer, either."

"I don't know, honey!" He sighed, feeling a lot older than he should. "We both agreed not to tell the kids what's going on. After it's all over, fine, but not now, for crying out loud! Isn't it *enough* with the two of us worrying ourselves sick? Do the kids have to worry, as well?"

"Amy's their sister, Ian."

"And you're their mother, Rochelle. Maybe there's nothing you can

do for Amy right now, but you *can* make it easy on Liza and John."

It was a familiar argument by now, and Rochelle Forester did not feel like going through it again. "Yes," she agreed. "You're right, Ian."

"Of course I am, honey. You'll see, in a while, this will all be over and Amy will be back with us."

"But it won't be over, Ian, even when they let us have Amy back. You'll still be forced to work for that monster, Kingpin. I-I feel like he'll be in our lives forever."

Forester set his jaw, his steel-gray eyes glinting with sudden, renewed vigor. "No, he won't," he announced in a firm voice.

"What do you mean, Ian?"

"Just what I say, Rochelle."

"But how do you . . . ?"

"Look, honey," he said, touching her arm, "don't ask me any questions, please!"

Rochelle looked worriedly at her husband.

"Please, honey, promise me you'll trust me in this."

"All right," she agreed at last, reluctantly. Now, she had the life of her husband to worry about, as well as that of her daughter.

It was just as well she did not know his plans included double-crossing the man who controlled the fate of their youngest daughter.

Sixteen

J. Jonah Jameson sat behind his desk at the Jameson-for-Mayor headquarters in the Daily Bugle Building, staring in disgust at the sheet of paper in his hand, the results of the latest poll. Three lines were drawn on a graph, showing the up-to-the-minute status of each of the three primary hopefuls in the upcoming election: Ian Forester was in the lead with a healthy forty-eight percent of the people polled, followed by the incumbent with thirty percent and Jameson with barely nine percent.

"Robertson!" The *Bugle* publisher bellowed across the large floor to his city editor, who was currently checking over campaign posters in his capacity as assistant campaign manager.

Joe Robertson walked across the desk-lined room, two posters under his arms. "Yes, Jonah?"

Jameson flipped the single sheet of paper across his desk to Robbie. "Do you call this thing a poll, Robertson?" he demanded.

Robbie had seen the figures earlier in the day and knew his boss would react just as he was now. "The numbers don't lie, Jonah."

"No, but maybe that blasted pollster we hired *does!"*

"P.E. Levitz and Associates is the best there is, Jonah. They've predicted nine out of the last ten elections in New York to within one percent of the actual vote."

Jameson clamped his teeth around a cigar, scowling. "Hmmm. What've you got there?"

"The art department just sent these up," he said as he propped up both posters before Jameson's desk for the candidate's consideration. Both bore the slogan, "It Shouldn't Cost an Arm and a Leg to live in the City That Heads the Nation. Vote Jameson for Mayor." One showed a close-up shot of Jameson, smiling his toothy, shark-faced smile into the camera. The other, a more realistic view of the man, bore a photograph of him staring out of the poster with his usual sour-faced scowl. "I think we'd better get these out on the streets as soon as possible. Which one do you like, Jonah?"

Jameson pushed the cigar around his mouth for several seconds as he stared at the posters. Finally, he pointed to the one bearing his smiling face. "That's the one, Robbie," he declared. "I think it shows a man concerned with the business of running a city, but not so much that he ignores the voters. The suckers will eat it up!"

"You're the boss, Jonah." Robbie knew Jameson's chances of winning were nonexistent, especially against a man of Ian Forester's caliber. All the *Bugle's* city editor could do was make sure his boss did not suffer too greatly in defeat. After all, win or lose, they still had a newspaper to put out.

Peter Parker, looking refreshed after a solid night's sleep, stepped off the elevator arm in arm with Cindy Sayers. Despite some stiffness and a dull throbbing, his shoulder felt better than it had yesterday. He wore no sling, preferring to take his chances with his arm rather than risk anybody questioning him about the similarity between his injury and that of Spider-Man.

"Forty-third floor," he announced. "Women's lingerie, pots and pans, and politicians."

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask you, Peter," she said, "do you intend to vote for Uncle Jonah?"

"Are you kidding, lady? I've got to live in this city! How about you?"

She made a face. "We were never a very close family."

They maneuvered through the busy campaign workers scurrying about the floor and made their way to Jameson's desk. He sat studying his posters through a thick cloud of pungent, blue smoke, as Robbie ordered the one chosen by him from the printers over the phone.

"Greetings, gents," Peter called.

"What're you so happy about, Parker?" the *Bugle's* publisher asked without taking his eyes off his own face. "Somebody finally tell you you're supposed to take the lens cap off before you take a picture?"

"It's just a wonderful day to be alive, Mr. Jameson." He smiled. *After yesterday, any day's a wonderful day to be alive!*

"Prove it, kid."

"Is that any way to win my vote?"

"I'd rather lose then be beholden to a constituency made up of the likes of you, Parker," the older man growled.

Cindy waggled her fingers in Jameson's direction. "Hi-ya, Unk."

Jameson looked up from his posters, a look of anger on his face. "Who the hell are . . . ? Oh." He stood quickly, pointing over his shoulder at an empty office across the room. "I've been meaning to talk to you. Over here," he ordered, then started across the room without bothering to see if she followed.

Peter gave her a quizzical look. Cindy shrugged and hurried after Jameson, who waited impatiently, puffing smoke, by the office door. The door closed firmly behind them.

Peter perched at the edge of a desk and waited for Robbie to finish on the phone. *Strange. Those two are less like uncle and niece than any uncles and nieces I've ever seen. Still, considering Jameson's part of the relationship, I guess it's not so strange, at that.*

Robbie hung up the phone and smiled at the young photographer. "Hello, Peter."

"How's the political biz going, Robbie?"

"Awful!" He handed the results of the latest poll to Peter.

Peter whistled under his breath. "Jeez. 'Undecided,' whoever *he* is, has a better chance of winning than Jameson."

"It's not funny, son. Jonah's going to take an awful beating come election day. Forester's bound to pick up most of the undecideds, along with a goodly hunk of the mayor's supporters, by then."

"It's a good thing Jonah's got the paper to fall back on."

Robbie nodded. "True, but he's going to take this pretty hard, nonetheless."

"Maybe having his loving family around will help soften the blow some. His niece, Cindy, has a knack for that kind of thing."

"Niece?" Joe Robertson looked at Peter, confused.

Peter laughed. "Uh-huh, niece. It's not a foreign word, Robbie. It means . . ."

"I *know* what it means, Peter. I just never knew Jonah had one. In fact, I would've thought it was impossible."

"Don't be so hard on the man. I know he doesn't exactly look or act like a person, but even *I* assumed he had a family somewhere." He shook his head. "Though darned if I ever thought I could like anyone with a Jameson family background."

"That's not what I mean, Pete," Robbie said, stroking his chin

thoughtfully. “It’s just that I could have *sworn* . . .”

“Don’t keep me in suspense, man! What is it, already?”

“Peter, as far as I know, and I think after all these years I know him better than most people . . .”

“A credit, no doubt, to your legendary gift of patience!”

“. . . Jonah Jameson was an only child!”

“Come again?”

“Jonah never had any brothers or sisters, Peter!”

“Then how could Cindy be his niece?”

Robbie shrugged. “Now, *that* is a good question, son.”

Peter turned to look at the closed office door, his brow wrinkled in thought. *It sure is, friend! But why would she lie to me about something like that? Being related to Jameson isn’t something you’d want to admit to, even if it were true. Better question still: Why the devil is J.J.J. going along with this?*

Boy, what I wouldn’t give to hear what’s being said in that office, right now!

Jameson pointed to a straightback chair in front of the desk in the unoccupied office. “Sit!” he ordered Cindy, taking his own seat.

“I’d prefer to stand, thank you, ‘Uncle Jonah,’ ” she replied icily.

“Suit yourself. And you can cut the ‘uncle’ crap now, Ms. Sayers. We’re not trying to fool that punk boyfriend of yours now.”

“You don’t like Peter very much, do you?”

“Give me one reason why I should! He’s snide.”

So are you, you old goat, she thought. But what she said was, “What did you want to talk to me about, Mr. Jameson? I thought I told you over the phone last night that I still haven’t learned anything.”

Jameson stabbed a finger in the air. “Bingo!” he shouted. “You’ve been with him every day and most of the nights for the last two weeks. Don’t you think that’s plenty of time to have come up with *something?”*

“Not if there’s nothing to come up with.”

“There is. You just haven’t looked in the right places or asked the right questions.”

“Every time I mention Spider-Man, Peter just gives me a runaround. I don’t think there’s any mysterious connection.”

“Then explain all those Spider-Man pictures he manages to get when the closest anybody else in this city can come to the Wall-crawler is with a telescopic lens.”

"Peter's just lucky, that's all."

"Maybe he is lucky. But so often?"

Cindy shrugged. "You're making a mountain out of less than a molehill, Mr. Jameson. Peter Parker, whether you care to believe it or not, is an excellent news photographer, and the only thing he's doing is his job. Period."

"Then *you* do yours, Sayers." Jameson rose and began pacing back and forth in front of the desk as he chewed on the already-shredded butt of his cigar. "I'm tired of throwing good money after bad on you. Either come up with something, or stop wasting my money!"

Cindy put her hand on the doorknob. "I'm staying on, Mr. Jameson. Don't worry about that. But you can bet the only reason for it is to prove you wrong about Peter."

"Lord Almighty!" Jameson groaned. "I just got it! You're falling for that obnoxious little creep, aren't you?"

She glared her dislike at Jameson for several seconds, then yanked open the door and walked out. Yes, she was falling in love with Peter Parker. But, so what?

Lost in her thoughts, she did not notice the strange way Peter looked at her as she approached. She wouldn't have particularly cared if she had. She was far too ticked off at Jameson.

"What'd Uncle Sharkface want, gorgeous?"

"Nothing," she said testily. "Come on, Peter, let's hit the streets, huh? I don't feel like hanging out here right now."

"Sure."

Peter put his good arm around Cindy's shoulder as they walked to the elevator in silence.

The famous Parker luck strikes again! After all the hassles I had with Mary Jane Watson and Betty Brant, you'd think I'd finally be able to settle down to a nice, normal relationship with a great girl like Cindy, instead of having to figure out why she's lying to me!

Maybe I should've become a monk!

Seventeen

No sooner had Peter and Cindy stepped into the street from the Bugle Building, than Peter's remarkable spider-sense began tingling ever so slightly in his head. It was not the usual head-splitting throb of pain that heralded the coming of trouble. Rather, it was a mild warning that something bad was imminent. And when Cindy opened her mouth to speak, Peter knew what his unique sixth sense was warning him about.

"You know Spider-Man, don't you, Peter?"

Her tone was one of innocent questioning, perhaps nothing more than mere curiosity.

But Peter Parker knew better.

"We've, uh . . . met, if that's what you mean," he answered, trying to keep his voice normal.

"I know *that,"* she said. "But Uncle Jonah seemed to think you were a friend of his."

He laughed. *What's she after?* "Guys like Spidey aren't all that hot in the personal-friend department, Cindy. From what I can gather, he's pretty much a loner."

"But you *do* know him?"

"Uh-huh. Hey, you hinting you want me to get you his autograph?"

She fluttered her eyelashes at him and feigned embarrassment. "Why, Rhett," she said in her best Scarlett O'Hara voice, "you've

found me out!"

Have I ever, lady!

"How long have you known him?"

"Spider-Man?"

"I don't mean Howard Cosell, handsome. Of course, Spider-Man!"

"A couple of years, I suppose."

"Is that why you're the only photog in town he lets get pictures of him in action?"

"I dunno. I figured: Why screw up a good thing by asking too many questions?" Peter was getting nervous now. He was not sure where Cindy was headed with her questions about his alter ego, but one thing was for sure: *I hate it a lot!*

"Well, there must be a reason, Peter."

"Why all the sudden flurry of interest in Spider-Man, Cindy? You writing a book or something?"

"No need to get testy, Pete. I'm just curious, that's all. Spider-Man's hot news in New York, and I figure the more I know about stuff like that, the better I can do my job. What's so strange about that?"

"Well . . ."

"Oh, I get it," she said, a smile slowly spreading across her face. "You're worried that I'm trying to rip off your exclusive property, picture-wise."

"That's stupid, nonsense-wise, Cindy. Spider-Man's not my personal property. Anybody with $9.95 who wants to buy himself a Kodak can get all the pictures he wants of him."

"Only if that anybody happens to know where Spider-Man's going to be at a given time."

Slow down, boy! This is getting a lot deeper into the subject than is smart!

"Come on, Cindy," he said. "I don't want to talk shop all day. Why don't we drop the subject, okay?"

Dammit, she thought, *he's doing it again!*

"Okay by me, tall, dark, and handsome." She smiled. "But only if you promise to buy me lunch."

"Swell. How does a hot dog in Central Park sound to you?"

"Like a surfer who's gotten lost."

"Pardon?"

"Bad pun. Never mind."

Hand in hand, they strolled up Fifth Avenue toward Central Park, talking about everything *but* Spider-Man and pictures thereof. But

Peter Parker could not forget that this girl was lying to him, deceiving him for one purpose or another. And he was convinced he knew her reasons! *Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you, Peter!*

I think Jameson's on to me!

Eighteen

He lived surrounded by silver.

From the silver-threaded carpeting to the quantities of the precious metal inlaid in walls and ceilings to the silver fixtures in the bathroom of his Westchester hideout, the master criminal known as Silvermane felt he was truly where he belonged. It was more than merely the market value of the metal that attracted him to it so. It was the smooth, cool feel of it, the almost starlight luster it possessed. He had lied to gain possession of it; he had stolen and even murdered to gain more than he already had.

Indeed, Silvermane could never have enough of it.

He liked the feeling of tranquility that came with sitting in his all-silver den behind a solid silver desk, on a silver chair before his myriad of silver belongings. Only there was his mind at ease, allowing his thoughts to fall into the proper, logical sequences and his plans to take form. For, of all the places in the large Westchester mansion, this was the one that was truly his, and none were allowed to enter unbidden.

The last man who tried had died by Silvermane's own hand.

But the crime boss's thoughts were not on that now; rather, he contemplated the growing division between himself and his rival, the Kingpin. The fat man could not be overthrown by force; of that Silvermane was certain. He was far too powerful in New York and had too many supporters in the criminal community there. If Silvermane wished to usurp the other's throne, it must be through guile. And ensuring the failure of the Kingpin's current plans was by far the simplest route.

The silver-plated telephone on the desk buzzed softly for several moments before the silver-haired criminal heard it. “Yes,” he answered tersely.

“There’s a guy here to see you, boss.”

“I’m busy. Send him away.”

“It’s Ian Forester, Silvermane. Says he’s got to talk with you.”

Forester?

How the devil did the veteran newsman ever find him? And what could he want from Silvermane? *No matter,* the crime boss thought as an evil smile spread across his sharp features, *it merely saves me the trouble of bringing him to me!*

“Send him in.” Silvermane replaced the receiver in the cradle, caressing the cool metal under his fingers. He assumed a pose of calm indifference behind his desk, staring over steepled fingertips at the door as it opened, and Ian Forester hesitantly entered.

The candidate walked toward the desk, his hand outstretched in greeting. “Silvermane”—he smiled in his best television smile—“I’m . . .”

“I know who you are.”

Forester nodded as he lowered his hand uncertainly to his side. “Yes, you would, wouldn’t you?” He looked about the sterling-silver den, waiting to be offered a seat, but, when he saw no such offer was forthcoming, he continued quickly. “You’re not an easy man to locate, Silvermane.”

“I should be impossible to find, Forester.”

“You very nearly were, but luckily I still have a few underworld contacts left from my days as a newsman.” He laughed nervously. “Hard to believe that was only two weeks ago—”

“I assume,” Silvermane said quietly, “that you didn’t come here to discuss your life story, Forester.”

“In a way, I *did.* Only it’s not the past so much as the future that worries me.”

“Your future’s been all neatly mapped out for you. You’re going to be New York’s next mayor.”

“You mean puppet, don’t you, Silvermane? With the Kingpin pulling the strings!”

Silvermane said nothing. Ian Forester had come to him. It was still his move.

Forester leaned across the desk, resting his hands on the highly polished surface. He appeared not to notice Silvermane’s slight flicker of distaste at this move. “Look, Silvermane,” he said earnestly, “it’s no

secret that you and the Kingpin are the two biggest rivals for control of New York's organized-crime families. Hell, man, he hates you. You hate him as much, if not more. And frankly, I doubt that he's planning anything but killing you at the first chance he gets." He paused, looking for a reaction from the hawk-faced man.

"Go on," Silvermane said, his voice betraying nothing.

"Normally, I couldn't give a damn if you *both* killed each other. Neither of you means anything to me." Forester's voice turned hard with suppressed anger. "But the Kingpin took my daughter away from me, Silvermane. He's involved my little girl in things that she neither knows nor understands, and he's threatened the lives of the rest of my family.

"Yes, very suddenly, he's become a threat to me and my family. And maybe there's nothing I can personally do to him to make certain he can never carry out his threats. But *you* can, Silvermane!"

The master criminal was interested in the candidate's words, for Ian Forester, he knew, was leading up to the very thing Silvermane had planned. But let Forester think it was his idea. "Kingpin and I are allies in this, you know," he said impassively. "He's the one with the hold over you, not I."

"That could change."

"How? You don't dare step out of line while Kingpin has your daughter as a hostage."

"What if he no longer had her? I wouldn't be beholden to him then, would I?"

Silvermane waved this aside. "Pure speculation, Forester. The Kingpin *does* have your daughter, and only he knows where she's being held."

"You could kidnap her away from him, bring her back to me!"

For the first time since Forester had entered his office, Silvermane displayed some emotion. He laughed heartily. "What do you expect me to do, Forester? Pull her out of a tophat like a rabbit? I told you, only the Kingpin knows where she is, and that's the one aspect of this operation you can be sure he's not going to tell anybody about, *especially* me."

Forester looked into the criminal's eyes, his own steel-gray eyes flashing. "He's got her somewhere in the city," he said.

"I suppose he's told you, eh?"

"No. But he called the place where he's keeping her from my apartment the other night and he only dialed seven digits to reach wherever it is."

"So?"

"Don't you understand? If he'd hid her anywhere else *but* New York proper, he'd have had to dial an area code along with the phone number, a total of ten digits instead of just seven."

"I'd say that certainly narrows it down then, Forester," Silvermane replied in a dry voice. "I assume you know that New York's a fairly huge city. Where do you propose I start looking for her? At the Battery and work my way up?"

"Don't tell me a man with your resources can't find one girl, Silvermane! I don't believe it!"

"All right, Forester." Silvermane nodded. "Suppose I *could* find your daughter and get her away from Kingpin. Then what? He would've lost his hold on you and so would I, if I returned her to you as you ask. As far as I can tell, you're the only one who wins in that situation."

"You'd win, Silvermane. If you could get my daughter back to me, I'd owe you an awful lot. And I'd deliver the whole damned city right into your hands the minute after I'm inaugurated!"

Silvermane stroked his chin thoughtfully. What was Forester up to? Was he sincere, or was this merely a ploy to play the two criminal leaders against one another in the very definite hope that they would destroy each other, thereby freeing the candidate from any obligation to either man? Silvermane decided it was most probably the latter. But could he afford to pass up this chance to have Forester under his control?

"Very well, Forester," he said at length. "I'll find your daughter for you."

The look of relief was visible on Ian Forester's face. "Y-you will, Silvermane?"

"I wouldn't have said it, otherwise," he replied coolly.

"No. No, of course you wouldn't," Forester said quickly. "I-It's just that these past weeks have been hell for my wife and me. I can't believe that it'll be over so soon."

Silvermane rose from his seat, signaling the end of the interview. "I'll be in touch, Forester."

Ian Forester hurried to the door, his heart pounding like a jackhammer in his chest. He found it even harder to believe, but he had done it! He had actually managed to snow Silvermane!

Of course, compared to Kingpin, Silvermane was a street-corner punk, and Forester knew he could handle him. Hadn't he just proved that by convincing the other to go along with *his* plan? Silvermane would undoubtedly have to kill Kingpin to get Amy Forester away from him, but that was all right. Silvermane would not hesitate to slay

the Kingpin, and the fat man deserved no better. Afterward, when Amy was safely back home, the authorities could take care of matters from there. In all likelihood, Silvermane would wind up as dead as the Kingpin before this was over, but that fact did not both Forester, either, as long as the hawk-faced man remained oblivious to it until it was too late.

Unfortunately, Silvermane was not as stupid as Ian Forester thought.

Nineteen

Monroe stared in wonder at the tall, distinguished man who strode from Silvermane's private den, walking past him without any sign of recognition. He wondered what Ian Forester was doing here, of all places. Of course, he was just as happy that the candidate hadn't noticed him, on the off chance he would report the fact of this visit to Monroe's boss, the Kingpin.

The armed man outside Silvermane's door never took his eyes off Monroe or his hand from the butt of the pistol tucked in his waistband. Whatever Monroe's stated intentions for this visit, it did not pay to take chances with *his* boss's life. This man named Monroe had spent too many years working for Silvermane's arch rival, and, frankly, he would feel safer killing Monroe then and there. But he was under orders.

The intercom in the wall buzzed, Silvermane's signal to send in Monroe. "You want me to come in, too, boss?" the guard asked, eyeing Monroe closely.

"No need," the crime boss said. "I think I can handle matters."

Monroe stood and walked to the office door, stopping before the armed man and raising his arms above his head. "Want to search me again just to make sure?"

The guard gave Monroe a dirty look as he opened the door to let him in. Monroe brushed past him, laughing to himself. It was always

fun to bait the goons, he thought.

Silvermane was once again seated in his sterling-silver chair, surrounded by what must have been millions of dollars' worth of the metal. He pursed his lips, nodding slightly to himself in approval of the man's style. Monroe could appreciate that in a man, especially a highly placed crime boss. Of course, the Kingpin had style, as well, but nowhere near as much as Silvermane, it seemed to Monroe as he looked about him.

"So, you're one of Kingpin's men."

Monroe nodded. "Yessir," he said. "At least I was, sir." Respect cost Monroe nothing, but, he had discovered, potential employers loved to see it in a man.

"Was? I was under the impression the Kingpin isn't the type of man who allows his people to up and quit on him."

"He don't know I'm not working for him no more, sir."

Silvermane raised an eyebrow. "So you've just decided it was time for a change of scenery? Not very reliable, wouldn't you say so, Monroe?"

"I'm looking out for myself, sir. Besides, Kingpin's been treating me more like dirt than anything else lately. I decided I was better off coming to see you. Besides, Kingpin's planning something with this Forester thing." He leaned forward, speaking in a conspiratorial tone. "I think he's planning to screw all the rest of you guys . . . gentlemen . . . out of your shares."

"Do tell."

"Yessir."

"And how does he plan on doing that?"

Monroe shrugged. "Beats me, sir. Kingpin ain't let me in on anything he's done for a long time now. He just uses me to drive his car or to bodyguard his wife."

Silvermane chuckled as he shook his head in disbelief. "Really, Monroe! How stupid do you think I am, hmmm?"

"I don't know what . . ."

"Come, now! You come waltzing in here with some story about what a poor, mistreated soul you are, how all you want is to join my organization for protection from the Kingpin, and you expect me to *believe* it?" He laughed. "Go back and tell your boss it doesn't wash, Monroe. If he wants to get a man inside my gang, he'll have to come up with a better way. Much better!"

"Honest, Silvermane, sir," Monroe assured him, "this ain't part of Kingpin's plans. Hell, if he even *thought* I was here, he'd kill me for sure. I'm telling you the truth, sir. It's just that when Kingpin pulls his

double-cross, I don't want to be caught in the middle of it. I don't know what Kingpin plans to do afterward, but I'm still going to be around this business."

Through cold, veiled eyes, Silvermane studied the hoodlum for several long moments. "How can I be sure you're not lying to me?"

Monroe smiled the smile of a man who knows he has the proverbial ace in the hole. "Because I can tell you where he's got the Forester chick stashed . . . sir," he added hurriedly.

"She's in the city." Silvermane made this statement as a fact.

Monroe was startled. "Uh . . . yeah . . . yessir."

"If I knew that, why do I need you?"

This was turning out to be a lot harder than Monroe had expected. Still, the very fact that Silvermane was already aware of what was supposed to be a secret confirmed his view that he had made the right decision in coming to see the rival gang leader.

"I guess you'll have to decide for yourself, sir. I mean, I showed you I'm willing. Now you got to decide if I'm able."

"Does he still have the girl at his hideout?" Silvermane did not know for certain this was where Amy Forester was being held, but if he had kidnapped her for something as vital as this operation, he'd want to keep her nearby in case of sudden trouble. He figured the Kingpin would take similar precautions.

"Yessir. He's got her in a cell in the basement with round-the-clock security."

"Very well, Monroe." Silvermane smiled warmly at the man. "Welcome to the organization."

At that moment, many miles to the south of Silvermane's Westchester mansion, Spider-Man swung through the late afternoon sky over the city. He had been at it for hours now, swinging aimlessly about on his indestructible webbing in what was rapidly shaping up to be a waste of time. His intentions for these wanderings was to clear his thoughts and perhaps come up with answers to even a few of the many questions plaguing him.

So far, he had succeeded in doing neither.

The Web-slinger landed nimbly on the cornice of a building on Second Avenue, his deep sigh lost in the wind that blew past him. *She loves me, she loves me not. She's spying on me, she's spying on me not. Lord, I wish I could make up my mind. But if she is in love with me like I think—'cause God knows this little Wall-crawler's fallen for her like a ton of bricks—then why'd she lie about being Jameson's niece?*

He leaped from the cornice, firing twin strands of webbing at a

building up the street. *Then, again, maybe jolly Jonah's an old friend of her family's and the "Uncle" bit's just an honorary title of endearment. It's possible.* He shook his head.

Then why am I so sure she's been lying?

Reaching the apex of his swing, Spider-Man let go of the webbing in his hand and aimed his falling body at a flagpole jutting from the tenth-floor window of a nearby building. He grabbed it, swinging himself around, and landing on the ledge just beneath it. He winced in pain at this maneuver, rubbing at his still-sore shoulder. *And what about all those questions she's been asking about yours truly? Are those the questions of an innocent girl, or does she know something about me she shouldn't?*

Like my secret identity, maybe.

Heck, I don't know. Maybe after all these years, Jameson finally figured out that the only way to get all the pictures of Spidey I manage to bring in is for me to be Spider-Man. After all, the man's not stupid, just obnoxious!

Spider-Man squatted down on the narrow ledge and rested his masked chin in his hands. *So what're you going to do about it, smiley? I can't risk asking her point-blank, not if she already suspects. That would be the old straw that crippled the camel!*

And as if that weren't enough, there's always the extra added attraction of ol' skin and bones himself—the Kingpin—and his handy, dandy friendly neighborhood Spider-Man Instant Framer, sure to get them warrants for arrest issued fast, faster, fastest! For some reason, Tubs has taken a big disliking to Forester, and whatever fatso hates, fatso gets rid of! So why not incriminate me in the process? It doesn't cost him any extra, and it's a good bet I'd've been too busy dodging cops to chase after him if Robbie, God bless his blue pencil, hadn't been able to talk "Uncle" J.J.J. into running the truth in the Bugle.

A startled gasp from a nearby window interrupted Spider-Man's reverie. He turned to see a small, nervous-looking certified-accountant-type staring in wonder, his hand frozen in midair in the middle of tossing bread crumbs to pigeons roosting on the ledge.

" 'Scuse me, fella," Spidey said, rising. "I thought this was where you catch the M105 bus." With that, he leaped out into the air, waving over his shoulder at the little man as, with his other hand, he shot a strand of webbing to the opposite side of the street. He twisted in mid-swing, smoothly turning the corner of Forty-first Street and heading west across town.

In short order, he came to the corner of Forty-first Street and Lexington Avenue and stopped to catch his breath as he clung to the side of a building.

His spider-sense didn't give him a chance.

Suddenly, his head exploded in a burst of throbbing pain, so intense for a short moment that he knew danger must be breathing down his neck. Or vice versa. Quickly, he scanned the streets below. *Nada . . . wait!* His eyes focused on the Lexington Avenue entrance to Grand Central Station and the figure clad in skintight, dark blue and red that stood poised before it. *Oh thank you for the early Christmas present, Santa!* The Web-slinger did not even have to wonder long at the fortuitous circumstances that had brought the phony Spider-Man here, for, from his perch high above the street, Spider-Man could see the entourage of Ian Forester making its way toward the station. Forester, two deep in worried-looking bodyguards, was making slow progress up the block as he shook hands with each and every person who passed near enough to him.

Take your time, Ian, old boy. I've got to sweep some of the garbage off the streets before you get here.

Swiftly, Spider-Man shot a line of webbing to the roof of the building directly across from him on Lexington Avenue. He swung himself over to it and scampered across the rooftops toward Forty-third Street. *Kingpin's got Spidey Junior rigged up with too many fancy gadgets, especially that nerve-gas, which I ain't too thrilled about getting hit with again, so I'd better not give him the chance to use it!*

He climbed down the façade of the building directly over the head of his unsuspecting double. *It's a good thing a spider-sense doesn't come with the costume!* He dropped the last dozen feet to the sidewalk behind the other's back, his booted feet making no sound that could be heard over the noise of the heavy midtown traffic.

Silently, Spider-Man raised his fist. Then, abruptly, he lowered it again. *Aw, I just can't bring myself to hit a guy when he's not looking!*

"Don't you think you're a little too old and a lot too early in the year for trick-or-treating, handsome?"

The fake Spider-Man whirled and the Wall-crawler was sure his mouth was hanging open under his mask. "Y-you!" he gasped.

"Nope! Guess again!"

Spidey lunged, immediately pinning his double's arms to his sides with a bone-bending bear hug. The other struggled in Spider-Man's steely grip, but the Web-slinger wasn't weakened by nerve gas now, and the advantage was most certainly his.

"Okay, friend, we're going to play 'Tell Spidey Everything' now. I think you can figure out the rules for yourself."

The fake Spider-Man twisted suddenly to his right, yanking hard on the real Web-slinger's damaged shoulder. Spider-Man's grip loosened a little and the other man pressed his advantage by driving a heel backward into his captor's shin. Then the fake tore himself free and,

while Spider-Man was still making sure nothing had been broken in his aching shin, disappeared into Grand Central Station.

Spider-Man followed his double through the revolving doors and through the light, pre-rush-hour traffic of commuters and subway riders.

Grand Central used to be a source of real pride for New Yorkers in the days of the passenger trains. It was a masterpiece of architecture, the so-called Crossroads of the World. But these days, in the era of the supersonic transport, the old station was little more than another stop on the subway map and a stopping place for several nearly bankrupt commuter railroad lines. Some in the city even wanted to tear down the street-level portion of this monument and build a luxury hotel atop it, but this proposal was met with resistance and its continued existence became one of the year's *cause célèbre.* For the time being, at least, Grand Central would stand.

Up ahead, the fake Spider-Man leaped over a turnstile, bringing an angry shout from a Transit Authority policeman who started after him. Spider-Man was right behind them both as he vaulted the same turnstile. Spidey raised his hand to fire his webbing, but a sudden flow of passengers disembarking from a nearby train blocked his way.

"Out of the way!" he shouted, dodging and weaving through the crowd like a running back carrying the ball toward his goal. But this was New York and the residents of this metropolis tended to ignore such shouts, especially in places like Grand Central Station, where, as everybody knew, half the weirdos in the world hung out.

Spider-Man stopped dead in his tracks and, flexing his powerful leg muscles, he sprang straight up into the air, his fingertips adhering to the ceiling of the tunnel. Then, hanging upside down, he began crawling as fast as he could after his prey. Even the most jaded of New Yorkers could not help but be amazed by that.

The tunnel terminated in the enormous, high-dome-ceilinged central core of the station. Spider-Man dropped to the mottled marble floor right behind his fleeing double and the persistent T.A. policeman. There were few other cops about the station, but those stopped what they were doing to gape at the pair of costumed Spider-Men running by them.

Spidey got a clear path ahead of him and shot his webbing at the red-booted feet of the phony. The man stumbled and fell to the littered floor with the heel of one boot webbed securely to it. He cursed loudly as he yanked his foot free of the trapped boot, but before he could rise again, Spider-Man was standing over him.

"This is getting to be a really boring habit, friend," the Web-slinger said seriously. "What say we end it right here and now?"

The fake cursed again and sprayed a cloud of gas at Spider-Man's face from the nozzle at his wrist. Spidey ducked under the noxious fumes and grasped the other man's arm. He yanked the fake roughly to his feet and then tossed him over his hip, sending him flying through the air and slamming him again to the floor. Dazed, the man in the Spider-Man suit shook his head spastically and groped for something in his belt.

He threw another of the miniature, box-shaped explosives at the spot where Spider-Man had stood just seconds ago. But the Web-slinger was already moving as he enveloped the bomb in a compact ball of chemical webbing that smothered the small blast even before it could hit the floor. While he did this, the other scrambled to his feet and started running across the huge, domed area, toward the giant clock faces set in the center of the terminal.

Spider-Man sighed. "You're not going to make this any easier on either of us, handsome." He shot a strand of webbing to the ceiling and swung himself after the costumed man.

When the fake looked over his shoulder, all he saw was a blur of red and blue arching through the air toward him. He stopped suddenly and, at the last instant before the swinging blur's feet could strike him squarely in the chest, he threw himself to the floor, rolling back onto his feet and running with all the speed he could muster toward an escalator leading to the balcony that surrounded the station. Spidey released his hold on the webbing and dropped to the floor. He spun and fired his webbing at the balcony's railing, then pulled himself up to it.

The Transit Authority policeman who had pursued the fake through the turnstiles stood in the center of the station, his head tilted back to watch the action on the balcony. He wasn't sure about what was going on up there, for all he could see was two identically garbed men grappling with one another at the balcony's edge. They traded blows for long seconds that seemed like minutes, neither man seeming to hold the upper hand. Then, with a teeth-jarring blow that echoed through the high-vaulted room, one of them fell to the floor of the balcony, apparently unconscious.

He could see neither man for several minutes as the victor knelt on the floor beside the other man. Then, the winner of this odd battle stood and ran down the escalator, disappearing through one of the many tunnels leading to the station.

Twenty

A warm spring breeze blew off New York Harbor that night, gently scattering the remains of the day's litter left behind on the Manhattan side of the waterfront and rippling the otherwise calm surface of the water. A lone man stood outside the entrance to a seemingly abandoned warehouse, standing well back in the shadows that all but hid him from view, save for the glowing red tip of his cigarette. He leaned comfortably against the wall as he smoked, the fingers of his right hand never straying far from the pistol strapped to his waist. Seldom, if ever, did the armed man have to move from his post for reasons other than working the cramps out of his leg muscles. Hardly anybody, other than the drunks and the derelicts who slept in the shelter of the surrounding warehouses, ever came to the docks after dark, anyway, but each night, the man was sent to stand watch over the heavily padlocked door. It wasn't necessary, he thought, but that's the way his boss wanted it.

And he knew better than to argue with the Kingpin.

But he was bored, dammit. Night after night in the darkness looking out for . . . what? Nothing, that's what! The Kingpin was the big fish in New York, and there wasn't anyone who was stupid enough to dare launch an attack on his stronghold.

The armed man flicked the cigarette butt across the dark, deserted pier and looked at his watch.

Two-forty-seven.

It was still more than four hours until another man would relieve

him of this chore, but already he was tired. He sure hated night work, he thought, yawning. Maybe if he just rested his eyes for a few seconds he'd be okay. That's why he never saw the crimson-gloved fist that sent him slumping, unconscious, to the hard ground.

The man in the Spider-Man suit stepped from the shadows next to the unconscious figure, tenderly rubbing his knuckles. Wasting no time, he dropped to his knee beside the man and quickly rummaged through the armed man's clothes. In his hip pocket he found two keys, both, obviously, for the heavy locks on the warehouse door. As an afterthought, the costumed man picked up the guard's pistol and heaved it across the dock, into the still waters of the bay.

The colorfully garbed figure stepped quietly to the door, trying not to rattle the thick padlocks against their metal hooks as he opened first one and then the other. He set them both down on the ground and then carefully and slowly pulled open the door.

There was a single, glaring bulb burning in the partitioned-off vestibule just inside the entrance. The costumed man peeked through the narrow crack between the door and the frame and saw a husky man seated behind a desk, his attention focused on the early edition of the *Daily Bugle.* His gun was in a shoulder holster under his left arm.

Making as little noise as possible, the costumed man pushed open the door and charged like a raging bull at the seated thug. The man started suddenly when the door flew open, dropping his newspaper in surprise. But his astonishment was short-lived and, with a growl, his hand reached swiftly for his gun. He wasn't swift enough, however, and the masked intruder had vaulted over the desk and slammed into him before his fingers could close around the pistol's grip. The seat skidded backward across the floor several feet before one of its legs snagged in a hole in the linoleum and the chair crashed to the floor. The masked man rolled away from the toppled office chair and sprang back to his feet, prepared to face the gunman. But the gunman was no longer a threat now, not after hitting his head against the hard floor.

The masked man cocked his head, listening for activity on the other side of the partitions. He could hear nothing, which probably meant those inside had not noticed his entrance.

He slipped silently through the door that lead to the interior of the warehouse and found himself in a vast, dimly lit room of poured-concrete construction. Scattered around the perimeter of it were a few crates; but aside from that and judging from the immaculately clean quality of it, it was obvious this warehouse had not been used to store anything in a long while. The information he had received was correct.

He ran on tiptoes across the concrete floor to a single firedoor on

the opposite side of the room. He pressed down on the bar and, after checking to make sure no more guards awaited him on the other side, he went through the door. It was like he had stepped into the finest hotel in the city.

The walls of the wide corridor were lined with heavy oak paneling on which hung a variety of paintings by famous artists. The masked man was sure they were not copies. After several yards, the corridor branched off into two, one lined with doorways leading, the man assumed, to offices, sleeping quarters, and the like, and the other, much shorter, with a single plain wood door at the far end. He took the shorter corridor.

The door opened onto a stairway that led down to a basement. The costumed man started to descend into the darkness when he heard a sound behind him.

It was the shuffling of many feet running across a linoleum-covered floor.

He turned to face a trio of men rushing down the hallway at him, guns drawn. Cursing under his breath, he dashed down the stairs, the three gunmen at his heels. He came suddenly to the bottom step and, lost in the darkness of an unfamiliar place, tumbled to the floor with a thud. He lay there, holding his breath as he listened to the gunmen's shoes pounding against the wooden stairs in pursuit. In a moment, the first man reached the bottom of the steps, but, like the masked man, he, too, was hampered by the darkness and therefore did not see his prey lying in his path. With a yelp, he tripped over the huddled shape on the floor and crashed to the floor, his gun flying from his hand. That was one.

The masked man's eyes had partially adjusted to the dim light and he could make out the dark forms of the remaining men on the stairs. They had stopped short when they heard their comrade's cry and now they were listening, waiting for the intruder to make the next move. He obliged them. Keeping low to the floor, he crept up to the foot of the stairs and reached up until his fingers closed around an ankle. He pulled on it.

With a startled cry, the man in the lead found himself flying through the air and landing on his rear end with a spine-jarring crash. The masked man knocked him unconscious before he could utter a second sound.

That was two.

He didn't worry about subtlety with the third and final member of the group, preferring instead to launch a frontal attack, knocking the gun from the man's hand and punching him in the jaw.

And *that* was three.

The costumed man peered into the darkness and found that what he had previously mistaken as an optical illusion was actually a very narrow strip of light by the floor—like the glow from under a door. He felt his way carefully across the small basement until he came to the source of the light. Feeling around with his hands, he could tell it was indeed a door, a reinforced metal door held shut by a slip-lock over the knob. This was the place.

He pulled back the bolt and swung the door open. Inside was a ten-by-ten-foot room, furnished simply but comfortably with a bed, an easy chair, a small desk-and-chair set, and a television and radio built into the whitewashed wall. Lying asleep in the bed was a teen-aged girl. She was sixteen, but she looked much younger in repose, practically a baby.

The man in the Spider-Man costume knelt by the bed and gently shook the girl's shoulder. She responded sleepily, pushing away his hands, but he persisted, and soon her steel-gray eyes opened. She looked into the red, eerie mask the man wore and her mouth opened as if to scream. Quickly, the man placed his hand gently over her mouth and brought a warning finger to his own lips.

"It's okay, Amy," he whispered reassuringly. "I've come to take you back to your folks!"

No one challenged the brightly garbed man and the young girl clad only in a nightgown as they hurried quietly through the sleeping headquarters of the Kingpin, past the still-unconscious guards. Once free of the criminal boss's hideout, they ran across the silent dock to a silver limousine parked several hundred yards away on the dark street. The man in the Spider-Man costume gestured for her to get in the back seat while he slipped into the front.

"Daddy!" the girl sobbed as she saw one of the two men who waited patiently in the spacious seat. She threw her arms around Ian Forester's neck and held him tightly to her, crying convulsively against her father's strong shoulder. Forester clung to her just as tightly, touching her to make certain she was really with him once again after the weeks of uncertainty and torturous waiting.

"Well, Forester, you have your daughter back," Silvermane smiled warmly at the tearful reunion.

Forester nodded. "Yes," he managed to say. "Thank you, Silvermane. Thank you so . . ."

"You know how you're supposed to thank me, Forester. That'll be more than adequate, I'm sure." He smiled. "Driver!"

The silver limo pulled smoothly away from the curb with its four very unlikely passengers: one of New York's most powerful criminal bosses; a candidate for the job of mayor of the city and his young

daughter; and a man clad in the crimson-and-dark-blue garb of the super-hero called Spider-Man.

Twenty-One

"I still don't trust that man, Silvermane," Ian Forester said, seated now in the master criminal's Westchester hideout.

Silvermane glanced over at the man in the Spider-Man costume who leaned casually, arms folded across his chest, against the wall of the silver study. "Adler?" he said. "I explained about him to you already, Forester. He was necessary to the plan." Silvermane spread his hands in front of him and smiled wanly at the candidate. "I assumed you'd understand there was nothing personal in the attacks."

"It's hard not to take being threatened with murder personally, friend."

The criminal waved this aside. "He wouldn't have killed you, Forester. But I had to force Kingpin into a position where his plan was in jeopardy. I had to make *sure* there was enough interference so that it couldn't possibly succeed."

"You mean you *wanted* me to lose the election? But why? I thought you were the Kingpin's partner?"

"So did he," Silvermane chuckled. "True, we stood to make billions of dollars each with you under our control in City Hall, but frankly, it's more important to me to have Kingpin out of my hair at this moment. Besides, now that I've gotten your daughter back for you, we can still proceed as planned.

"Only *without* the Kingpin!"

The door to the study opened and Amy Forester, dressed now in

blue jeans and a man's shirt, entered. She didn't speak to anyone as she crossed the room and stood by her father's chair. Though she was freed of the Kingpin's clutches and back with her father, she was still frightened by the hawk-faced criminal who had arranged for her rescue.

"How are you, honey?" the candidate asked softly.

She nodded, keeping her eyes on Silvermane. "Fine, Daddy. They found some clothes for me upstairs. Is that *really* Spider-Man, Daddy?"

"No, honey. He works for Silvermane."

Suddenly the door flew open and a man clutching a rifle in his hands rushed in, his face taut with excitement. "Boss . . ."

Silvermane rose, eyes blazing beneath silver brows. "How dare you enter without permission, Daniels!"

"Sorry, Silvermane," the man stammered. "But this is an emergency! The Kingpin and his gang are attacking the mansion!"

"What!?"

"There's gotta be two dozen of 'em, boss, and they're all armed to the teeth. We tried to hold 'em off at the front door, but they blasted their way right past us! Those goons are out for your blood, boss!"

Silvermane was already running through the door, a silver-plated pistol from his desk drawer clutched in his hand. "Damn them," he said through clenched teeth. "How'd they *know?"* He stopped abruptly and turned to the man with the rifle. "Get Forester and the girl downstairs, Daniels. They'll be safe there." He pointed to the costumed man with the pistol. "You come with me, Adler!" Then he was gone, running to lead his troops into battle.

"You heard the boss," Daniels said to the masked man who had yet to move.

"Sure did, chuckles," the man in the Spider-Man costume said. "Only he's not *my* boss!" With that, he raised his arms and curled his fingers to touch the hidden buttons in his palms, sending a thick stream of indestructible web-fluid in Daniels's direction. In seconds, the armed man was trussed up in a tight strait-jacket of sticky webbing.

Ian Forester stared. "Good lord, man! Y-you really *are* the real Spider-Man, aren't you?"

"I ain't Casper the friendly ghost, Mr. Forester!"

"But how'd you . . . ?"

"I seriously doubt we have the time to go over all the details, sir, but suffice it to say, I took Silvermane's flunky's place yesterday. Although it beats me how *anyone* could've mistaken that guy for me. I'm much better looking, don't you think?"

"I don't understand . . ."

"Sir, any second now this place is going to look like the big battle scene from any World War Two movie of your choice. I don't think you want to be in the middle of that, especially with your daughter here!"

The veteran newsman gripped his daughter tighter to him. Already, in the distance, he could hear the crackle of gunfire and the shouts of many men engaged in battle. He nodded quickly. "You're right, Spider-Man. What do you want us to do?"

"I'm going to get you out of here and then I want you to get to the nearest telephone and get the cops here, pronto! Think you can do that?"

Forester nodded.

"Great! Let's go."

The Web-slinger stepped cautiously out into the hall, looking both ways. It was clear. He signaled for Forester to follow. They hurried along the empty corridor, Spider-Man in the lead to make sure the way was free of gunmen. Only once did someone appear around a bend in the hallway, but the Web-slinger grabbed him by his shirt before he could shout out and knocked him into unconsciousness.

Finally, the trio reached a back door. The fighting had yet to spread to the rear of the big mansion.

"You should be able to grab a car from the garage, sir. Just start driving away from here and don't stop for *anything!* If someone with a gun gets in your way on the road, run him down. Got it?"

Forester nodded. "Yes. I don't know how to thank you, Spider-Man. You've . . ."

"Forget it," the Wall-crawler said lightly. "Just make sure the newspapers spell my name right. Now, get going!"

Ian and Amy Forester ran out the back door and off the portico, then headed in a beeline for the garage around the side of the building. Spidey turned and ran toward the front of the house where the sounds of gunfire had grown closer together and louder. *It's going to be the St. Valentine's Day Massacre all over again if I don't get in there and stop those clowns!*

Outside the kitchen, a lone thug stood, his gun cocked and aimed down the hallway as a last line of defense against the invaders lurking beyond a single, fragile door. He whirled when the opening door bounced off his arm, not bothering to see who he was firing his gun at. Spidey leaped straight up, his fingers adhering to the ceiling as he swung his legs out, kicking the gunman in the face.

He dropped to the floor next to the unconscious man and took off in

a low crouch to the end of the corridor. There he paused next to the door, peering through the keyhole. Even in the narrow strip of the room he could see through the small opening, it looked like the climax to an episode of "The Untouchables." Silvermane's men had overturned the long sofa that ran the length of the wall opposite the entrance to the huge living room and were kneeling behind it, popping up sporadically to return fire. Spidey could not see the door to the room, but he could see bullets from that direction drilling through the plush, silver fabric of the sofa, ripping it to shreds. The settee's heavy antique wooden frame protected the men from harm.

Neither Silvermane nor the Kingpin was anywhere to be seen.

Straightening his shoulders and sighing heavily, Spider-Man grasped the doorknob.

Here goes nothin', Charlie!

After he had organized his men, Silvermane disappeared from their midst. None of the men was bothered by this fact. After all, he was the boss and he had more important things to do than shoot it out with a gang of rival criminals. That's what *they* were paid for, wasn't it?

The criminal mastermind had not reached his high position without learning something of the hazards the leader of a crime empire faces. Thus, he had an escape route planned for just such a contingency as this, a route unknown to any other man in his organization. He should have anticipated the attack by the Kingpin, though, and moved his operations elsewhere. But, he realized, locking himself in his silver-lined study, this was not the time for an analysis of his mistakes. That would come later, when he was once again safe.

In his haste, Silvermane almost tripped across the web-covered man on the floor, still struggling to release himself from the almost suffocating confines of the sticky chemical substance. The crime boss cursed. "No, dammit! It *can't* be him!"

"I-I didn't know, boss! You said he was Adler under that mask. Honest t-to God, Silvermane!"

Silvermane growled and kicked at the man's head. Stupid jackass, he thought as the helpless gunman moaned in pain. To hell with him. He'd leave him for Kingpin's guns! He stepped over the man and moved quickly to the wall behind his desk. He jabbed his finger into the narrow crevice between two of the sterling-silver wall panels, and, with the low hum of a well-oiled machine, the panel slid open.

The crime boss stepped into the dark tunnel beyond the panel, pausing to look back with wistful eyes at all the glittering, shiny silver that decorated the room. He hated to leave it all behind. Perhaps if he just took . . . No. A loud pounding on the door brought his thoughts

back to the matter at hand and, with a sigh, he ran down the dark tunnel as the silver panel began to slide closed.

The pounding on the door grew louder and more forceful until, with a crash, the lock burst open and the door slammed into the wall. The Kingpin, his beady eyes shiny with hatred, burst into the room right behind it. His eyes flickered quickly over Daniels, squirming on the floor in terror of the fat man, to the almost closed panel, behind which he could hear the fading echo of retreating footsteps.

Kingpin lumbered across the room and shoved his hands into the remaining space between the panel and the wall. He grunted as he applied his powerful muscles in a contest against the mechanism that operated the hidden entrance. Slowly, he halted the progress of the sliding panel and, with an extra burst of strength and the screeching protest of metal grinding against metal, he tore the panel almost completely from its track.

The footsteps were almost inaudible by now, but the Kingpin of New York crime knew his rival was down there, somewhere, and he would not get away. The huge man knew he could let no treason, no matter how insignificant, go unpunished. Silvermane's acts warranted nothing less than death!

Far ahead, he could see a pinpoint of light that grew larger as he approached. Obviously the tunnel, hewed from solid rock beneath the mansion, culminated in a cavern or room of some sort. The fat man slowed as he neared the crudely carved entrance to the lighted area. He could hear the sounds of splintering wood coming from there, like someone was tearing frantically through a crate.

Someone was, for when the crime king peered carefully into the room, he saw Silvermane, his silver-plated pistol lying on top of a stack of crates just out of his reach, rummaging through packing material in a hastily opened crate. The small rough-walled room was likewise carved into solid rock and was filled with boxes and packing crates marked *"ammunition"* or *"guns."* The silver-haired criminal had quite an impressive arsenal hidden beneath his Westchester hideout.

Kingpin entered the room silently while Silvermane's back was to him and effortlessly hefted a crate of guns over his head.

"Silvermane!"

The other criminal whirled, something long and metallic, from the crate clutched in his hands. He saw the Kingpin and then the crate he held and, as the big man tossed the two-hundred-pound weight at him, Silvermane threw himself headlong to the cold, stone floor. The crate shattered on the spot where Silvermane had stood just a second before. But before the thing had even landed, the Kingpin was running toward his rival, an animal-like growl growing in his throat.

"Don't do it, Kingpin!"

Silvermane was on one knee, the metallic object in his hands pointed straight at the big man's ample belly. It was a rifle, of sorts, but its barrel was far wider and its ammunition clip bulkier than the norm. The Kingpin came to an abrupt halt.

"This gun shoots special explosive charges, fat man," Silvermane hissed menacingly. "And even though I'm not the best shot in the world, even *I* couldn't miss you!"

"Then you had better kill me now, Silvermane," the Kingpin said calmly. "Otherwise . . ." His words trailed off and he smiled evilly.

Silvermane rose carefully to his feet, mindful that his aim did not waver from his rival's belly. "I don't think so, Kingpin," he said. "You may be the strongest man in town, but even you aren't going to be able to survive this thing."

"Perhaps not, but I shan't be the only one to die then this day, my silver-haired friend. My people outnumber yours, and once they find your no-longer-secret entrance down here, they will kill you." He chuckled. "Unless you would prefer to go back now and save them the trouble, hmmm?"

Silvermane laughed harshly. "You don't think I'm a fool, do you? There's another way out of here, you know. Your thugs'll never find me once I choose to disappear."

"But you *are* a fool, Silvermane," the fat man roared with laughter. "You sought to confound my project, but you became far too greedy for your own good. You should have been satisfied with your share of the profits rather than trying to have it *all*. But now, alas, it is too late!"

"For you, maybe. Maybe you don't know it yet, but you and your men aren't leaving here unless they're either dead or captured by the cops.

"Spider-Man's here!"

"I know about your costumed lackey," Kingpin said, shifting his considerable weight on his feet and waving his hand through the air.

"I'm not talking about him, fat man. The genuine article is here. Even as we speak, he's probably mopping up everybody left alive upstairs." He gestured with the gun. "Stand still, Kingpin!"

The Kingpin looked at Silvermane through veiled eyes, smiling. "Enough of this farce," he said at last. "I'm afraid the time has come for you to die."

Silvermane raised his weapon. "You're only partially right, Kingpin. It's time for a death, all right, but not mine." His finger tightened on the trigger. "Sure as hell not mine!"

He fired.

The small projectile exploded from the gun's barrel, streaking unerringly toward Kingpin's vast expanse of chest. But the fat man was moving even as the deadly explosive homed in on him, throwing his bulk to the floor and rolling quickly out of harm's way.

Silvermane had time to curse loudly only once as the explosive bullet flew over the head of its intended target and buried itself instead in a large crate containing four dozen hand grenades. With a deafening roar and a blinding flash of light, it detonated amongst the shipment of grenades, setting off a chain reaction among the thousands of pounds of explosives stored there.

And then the sky fell in on both Silvermane and the Kingpin.

Twenty-Two

“Okay, kiddies, your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man is here! Everybody who wants my autograph line up in place along the wall!”

The gunfire ceased for the briefest of instances as Spider-Man charged into the midst of the raging battleground that had once been Silvermane’s living room. Both sides lowered their weapons and stared at the Web-slinger, but their astonishment was short-lived, and within seconds they had started shooting anew, this time aiming for Spider-Man rather than each other.

“See that, boys? Once you find a common goal, you *can* work together like brothers!”

He sprang over the hail of bullets and attached himself to the ceiling by his fingertips and toes. The thugs turned their aim toward him there, but by the time they had pressed their triggers, he had scampered upside down along the ceiling, then sprang to the wall. He continued moving, bouncing from wall to ceiling to wall like a human pinball, too fast for the gunmen to follow.

Bullets drilled holes through the plaster all around him, some ricocheting off the silver ornaments hung about the room, but, miraculously, the fast-moving Wall-crawler evaded them all. Then, fixing a strand of webbing to the ceiling before the door to the room, he swung himself straight into the faces of the gunmen seeking cover there.

He rammed into one feet first, sending the man toppling backward

to the floor. He landed in their midst. “I’m sure a certain orange-skinned super-hero buddy of mine wouldn’t mind if I borrowed his favorite battle cry just this once gentlemen, so . . .

“It’s clobberin’ time!”

In the close quarters of the small hallway leading to the living room, the Kingpin’s men could not risk firing their weapons at Spider-Man for fear of accidentally shooting one of their own number, so many reversed their guns to use as clubs. Spider-Man ducked under a forcefully swung rifle butt, wrenching it from its owner’s hands as he drove a foot into the man’s stomach. He pivoted on the balls of his feet in time to bring the rifle up to block another blow from behind and then rammed the butt into his attacker’s chin. He grabbed yet another gunman by his shirtfront and swung him to one side to take one of his comrade’s punches intended for Spider-Man.

Another man rushed toward the super-hero, his hand holding a knife over his head. Spidey kicked one man out of the way and fired his webbing at the other, adhering both knife and hand to the wall. Then he spun again, delivering a vicious backhand slap to another thug’s face, using his momentum on the return swing to knock still another charging man down and out for the count.

Spider-Man stood now with his back braced against the wall, facing the four remaining gunmen. But by reducing the gang’s numbers so drastically, the Web-slinger had cleared the way for them to use their guns against him once more. Spider-Man propelled himself from the wall and landed on top of the quartet of closely grouped gunmen, his arms flailing seemingly without rhyme or reason. He immediately knocked aside one man, who fell with a low moan to the floor. Then he pushed another man in the chest and, arms windmilling in a desperate attempt to regain his balance, he tripped backward over his fallen comrade, cracking his skull loudly against the wall.

The remaining two men backed off quickly.

“Better say good-bye, creep,” one of them muttered as they both leveled their pistols at him.

“Why? You guys planning to leave?”

Spider-Man’s hands shot out before him as he fired his webbing, plugging the barrels of their guns as they pulled the triggers. From the first man’s gun, nothing happened save for the click of the hammer striking an empty chamber, but the second man’s gun exploded as the bullet struck the already-hardened webbing obstructing the barrel. With a cry of pain and alarm, he dropped the bent, smoldering gun to the floor, clutching his shattered hand to his chest. But his pain lasted only a moment before Spider-Man knocked him into unconsciousness even as his foot lashed out into the second gunman’s face.

"Yeah," he muttered, "I guess you *were* planning to leave at that."

Spider-Man spread a thick layer of webbing over the unconscious and semi-conscious men scattered about the floor.

"I know you boys would never dream of trying to cut out on me while I take care of your playmates, but why take chances, right?"

Not surprisingly, nobody bothered to answer the Web-slinger.

The gunmen in the living room had fallen silent in the half-minute or so it had taken Spider-Man to defeat Silvermane's forces, and they waited tensely behind their antique sofa shield, all guns aimed at the doorway. The sounds of struggle in the vestibule beyond the door had ceased and they knew that the man they had thought to be a comrade in costume would soon turn his wrath on them. But they, unlike the rival gang members, were prepared.

Thus, when the man-sized shape flew through the doorway, they immediately began emptying their weapons at it. The figure thudded to the silver-carpeted floor only ten feet in front of their shelter and jerked spasmodically as dozens of bullets riddled it, nearly tearing it apart.

Except the figure was not Spider-Man!

The Wall-crawler was on the ceiling directly over their heads, emptying his web-shooters over them to form a strong, impenetrable net from which there was no escape. Chuckling, Spider-Man dropped to the floor in front of the overturned sofa and strode to the bullet-ridden form on the floor.

"Guess the joke's on you, huh, guys?" he laughed. He picked up the shredded figure he had formed from his webbing and tossed it into the room as a diversion. He shook his head at it and *tsk*ed loudly. "Fella," he said to it, "you're a *mess!"*

Spider-Man rubbed his hands together and addressed the horde of Silvermane's men who struggled futilely to break free of their chemically created prison. "I want to thank you boys for the warm-up," he said, bowing from the waist. "But I'm afraid I can't stick around any longer and play. After all, If I left now without letting Kingpin or Silvermane in on the fun, they'd be real hurt, don't you think?"

"Do not worry yourself about Silvermane, Spider-Man!"

The Web-slinger whirled suddenly at the sound of that deep voice which emanated from the doorway behind Silvermane's trussed-up thugs.

"What the . . .?"

He faced the large, barrel-chested man who stood in the doorway, his clothes hanging in tatters from his vast body, covered by dust and

dirt but looking as fierce, as powerful, as ever despite the very obvious struggle he had just endured.

“I said, Spider-Man, you need not concern yourself with that fool Silvermane,” the Kingpin said. “He is dead.

“It is just you and I now, hmmm?”

Twenty-Three

The sudden silence was deafening.

For long moments after the roof of Silvermane's secret arsenal had collapsed around the heads of the rival criminal bosses in the aftermath of the exploding ammunition, not a sound could be heard in the artificially created underground cavern. Tons of rocks and dirt had fallen on top of the two men, burying them seemingly forever underneath it. Had anyone been there to see this disaster, they would have sworn that no man could live through it.

They would have been wrong.

Slowly at first, the rubble near the cavern's entrance stirred, sending a small avalanche of debris tumbling, echoing in the enclosed confines of the area. Then, as if a powerful digging machine was attacking the tons of rock from beneath, something gave way and there was a sudden, veritable geyser of rocks, big and small, flying upward into the air.

And with a roar of defiance to waiting death, the Kingpin was free!

The fat man staggered from the cavern and into the tunnel that led to Silvermane's mansion. He was torn and battered, yes, but the Kingpin was still alive.

Alive!

When at last the Kingpin reentered Silvermane's study, the sounds of gunfire could still be heard emanating from the rooms beyond, but as far as he was concerned, the battle had ended with the death of Silvermane, crushed beneath tons of debris in the cavern below. For, when the dead man's hired gunmen realized their leader was no more, they would suddenly lose their reason for fighting and, perhaps, join

forces with this day's victor.

But then, the closely spaced shooting abruptly ceased and it was only then that he remembered what Silvermane had said just before the sky fell in on him forever: *Spider-Man was here!*

He was weary and his whole body seemed to be a single, massive bruise that ached with his every step, but the battle was not yet done, after all—not while the accursed Web-slinger still breathed!

But that could be easily remedied.

Oh, my aching back!

Spider-Man looked into the eyes of the battered man and in them he saw a fire of rage that burned brighter than any he had ever seen. In the past, he had always come out the winner in his battles with Kingpin, but now . . . ? *There's only one way to find out, isn't there, Mr. Parker?*

"You have interfered with my plans for the final time, Spider-Man." The man's voice was barely audible, but there was no mistaking the menacing tone of his words.

Jeez, I almost believe him.

"What plans, butterball? Ian Forester's daughter is safely back in the bosom of her family, and even as we speak, the cops are on their way here. To tell the truth, I think you're finished."

"Then so are *you,* insect!"

The Kingpin stepped forward and grasped the bullet-ridden antique sofa, lifting it above his head with a grunt and heaving it at Spider-Man. The Web-slinger leaped out of its path as it crashed into and through the wall behind him.

"Temper, temper, fatso," he admonished, springing to his feet. *Whew! That could've been me instead of the wall.*

He brought his hands up and pressed the buttons in his palms to tie up the Kingpin in a web-cocoon that even the crime king's great strength would be unable to break.

Fssstt! Fssstt!

Just bully. I used up all my webbing fighting the hired help, and it's a sure thing I can't call for time out to replace the empty cartridges.

With a roar, the Kingpin charged across the room, his head down like an enraged bull. Spider-Man side-stepped the mountain of flesh and bone at the last possible instant, bringing his left elbow down with all his might on the man's exposed neck. A wave of agony shot through his shoulder and Spider-Man gritted his teeth beneath his mask to keep from crying out. *Unnh! I forgot about that shoulder of mine! Hurts like the dickens!*

But the Web-slinger's blow had driven the Kingpin to his knees, momentarily dazed, a vulnerable target for maybe another second until he regained his senses. *Still, neither rain nor sleet nor snow nor a dislocated shoulder will stop this Wall-crawler from his appointed job, namely beating the bad guys.* He leaped onto the Kingpin's back, wrapping his legs around his thick torso and covering the fat man's eyes with his gloved hands.

"Peek-a-boo, Porky. I see you."

With a growl of rage, the Kingpin reached behind his head and grasped Spider-Man's shoulders in his meaty hands. The Web-slinger tightened his hold as the Kingpin pulled at him and rose, staggering slightly, to his feet. He dug his powerful fingers into Spidey's upper arms, applying numbing pressure. Spider-Man gasped as his arms loosened around the Kingpin and the fat man bent forward suddenly at the waist, tearing the clinging hero loose and sending him flying through the air.

Spider-Man twisted his body in midair and landed on his feet several yards away from the Kingpin. He rubbed his numb arm, feeling sensation slowly returning. "Is it something I *said,* maybe?"

The two men circled each other, slowly making a circle in the middle of the living room floor.

"You fool!" Kingpin spat. "The damage you have caused can never be repaired! You have destroyed my final chance for a normal life!"

"What'd I do? Tear up your diet book by accident?" Spider-Man's tone was light, but beneath the red mask, his face was deadly serious, taut with strain. His eyes shifted quickly behind the opaque lenses searching for an opening in his opponent's defenses. There was none. The Kingpin was well versed in the art of hand-to-hand combat.

The Kingpin's right arm shot out, almost too fast to be seen, but Spider-Man was faster still. His fingers closed tightly around the thick wrist and he stepped in close to the huge man, tossing him in a single, fluid motion over his hip and into a table. The antique wooden coffee table gave way as the Kingpin slammed heavily into it.

Spider-Man sprang at his fallen opponent but was stopped when the Kingpin's foot lashed out, catching him squarely in the chest and pushing him roughly back. Before he could recover, the Kingpin was on his feet, rushing toward him. He grabbed the Web-slinger by the front of his costume and yanked him bodily into the air, lifting the struggling hero over his head like a child.

"It would have been perfect, damn you, *perfect!"* the Kingpin growled through clenched teeth. "Those cretins believed every word I said! They believed I was actually trying to get our man into City Hall as our puppet-mayor so we could loot this city clean!"

He heaved Spidey through the air, sending him tumbling out of control into a tall, silver-plated pole-lamp in one corner of the room. Spider-Man landed on his left shoulder with a sickening crash, this time almost blacking out from pain that shot through his entire arm. He knew, through the haze of pain, that that arm would be useless for the duration of the fight.

"Their problem was they were too greedy. I dangled the possibility of *billions* before their eyes in exchange for a paltry few million dollars a man, but in their greed they never realized the plan could not work! Forester would have been elected, yes, but there was no way to hold him after that, you see. He would have merely had to go to the federal authorities and they would have provided protection for his family!"

Spider-Man groaned and tried to stagger to his feet. He fell back, clutching the pole-lamp. *What's this guy babbling about?*

"Forester is no fool, insect," Kingpin said, stopping just outside of Spider-Man's reach. "Once his daughter was returned to him after the election, he would have figured it out before long. And all the dreams of untold riches would have died then and there."

"T-then what the hell was a-all this for?" *Keep on talking, butterball. It just gives me more time to get my head on straight again.*

"For *me,* you dolt, and for my wife." Kingpin's voice softened suddenly as he thought of the tall, regal woman who he loved. "For my dear, dear Vanessa. She could no longer tolerate the uncertainty of my criminal life, you see, and wanted me to leave it behind. And I wanted to, if only so I would not lose her.

"The money I had deceived my rather gullible colleagues into contributing for the execution of my plan would have been more than adequate to finance the new life I envisioned for us both abroad, where no one would know who or what I was. But now . . ."

You said it, fats . . . NOW!

Without warning, Spider-Man used his good right arm to pull the silver pole-lamp free of the clamps that held it moored securely to the ceiling and floor. He rammed it into the Kingpin's stomach and the crook doubled over in pain as the air exploded from his lungs. In the same motion, the Wall-crawler brought the tip of the lamp up into the fat man's jaw, snapping his head back. Yet still the Kingpin stood, his eyes glazed. Spidey dropped the lamp and followed his one-two punch with a right cross to the other's face. Grunting in pain, the Kingpin stumbled backward but did not fall.

"What are you, anyway, Clothespin? Second cousin to an oak tree? This is the part where you're supposed to fall down and get unconscious."

The big man shook his head violently, clearing the cobwebs from

his muddled thoughts. He wanted nothing more than to do as the Web-slinger said, but he would not, could not, while the possibility of escape still existed. What would Vanessa do if he were . . .

Vanessa!

The thought of her filled the Kingpin with new reserves of strength he had not known were within him. He could not let Spider-Man defeat him, if only for her sake!

Spider-Man had not expected the master criminal to recover so swiftly; thus, he was unprepared when the Kingpin threw all of his awesome weight into a final, desperate lunge. He could not get out of the way in time, and when the quarter-ton of enraged criminal landed fully on him, he could only roll with the man's bulk and hope he would not be crushed beneath it.

The Kingpin's sledgehammer-like fist thudded against the side of Spidey's head as the two men went down in a churning pile of arms and legs. The Web-slinger was pinned down to the floor by the Kingpin as his hands sought a hold around Spider-Man's throat.

"Yes"—the Kingpin breathed heavily—"it would have been the perfect operation . . . a fitting finale for the finest criminal career of all time! I would have had over twenty million dollars with which to start our life anew, and the true beauty of it all was my comrades in crime would never have pursued me to exact their revenge for my transgression!"

His hands found purchase around Spider-Man's throat and he began to squeeze, his piggish eyes shining. "They would have been too preoccupied fighting one another for control of my abandoned territory to concern themselves with me for many months, and by that time, Vanessa and I would have disappeared, seemingly off the face of the earth!"

Spider-Man clawed desperately at the Kingpin's hands as the very breath was slowly wrung from his neck. *Gotta do . . . something . . . real fast or I-I'm a . . . a dead man!*

"But you, insect—you came along and ruined this one last chance I had for happiness. I risked all for this . . . even lied to my wife to attain my goal. *Lied to Vanessa* . . . and now even that deplorable act will have been in vain."

Black spots floated before Spider-Man's eyes as he felt consciousness slowly slipping away from him. It would all be over in another moment, unless . . .

Spider-Man wiggled his arms out from beneath the Kingpin, every move sending fresh waves of pain slicing through his wounded shoulder. *At . . . at least with t-the pain I . . . I know I'm still alive!* Gathering the last bits of strength in his tortured body, the Web-

slinger clapped his hands as hard as he could over the Kingpin's ears.

The fat man gasped in pain, relinquishing his hold just long enough to allow Spidey to breathe again. Quickly, he gathered air in his aching lungs even as his right fist connected solidly with the Kingpin's jaw. Spider-Man pushed the Kingpin from him, sending the criminal boss crashing on his back to the floor, then leaped onto his enormous stomach.

"Tables are turned now, fatso," he croaked angrily, sending blow after blow into the dazed man's face. The Kingpin struggled, but the events of the day had taken a horrible toll on his awesome strength, and now he had none left with which to defend himself from Spider-Man's savage attack.

"Stop it, Spider-Man! Please, you'll *kill* him!"

The pleading female voice cut through the red haze of anger that filled Spider-Man's vision and thoughts, bringing him back to reality. He gazed down at the Kingpin's bloated, bleeding face and the ugly black and purple bruises that were already beginning to form there as a result of his countless blows. He hadn't known what he was doing.

"Spider-Man!"

He turned to face the speaker as he rose, his arms hanging like lead weights at his side. *God, I'm tired.*

"It's all right, Vanessa" he said softly to the woman by the door. "He's not dead."

Vanessa squeezed her eyes shut to try and stop the tears that she knew were coming. "Thank God," she whispered. "Thank God."

Spider-Man propped himself up against the wall, his right hand massaging his throbbing shoulder. It was all over now. Soon he would be able to get all the rest he wanted.

In the distance, he heard the whine of approaching sirens.

Twenty-Four

It was a weary Spider-Man who replaced the empty cartridges of web-fluid at his wrists with fresh ones from his belt as he stood over the immobile form of the Kingpin. Vanessa knelt beside her unconscious husband, cradling his head in her lap. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she gently stroked his bald pate, but she made no sound.

Spidey kneeled down on one knee beside the big man and lifted his limp arms.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure he doesn't split before the cops get here. I don't think it'd be a good idea if they found me here."

"That will not be necessary, Spider-Man," she said, her voice firm despite her tears. "My husband will not be going anywhere."

He looked into her sad eyes and nodded slowly as he stood.

"Sure."

The Kingpin moaned softly as he slowly returned to consciousness. The sirens were drawing closer.

"What will happen to him?" she asked.

Spider-Man shrugged. "Prison, I suppose, but that shouldn't be too hard on a man like the Kingpin. He's a big man to the other prisoners. What about you, Vanessa? Will you be . . . ?"

"Yes," she said quickly. The Kingpin's head stirred in her lap and his eyelids began to flutter open. "I shall be all right." Vanessa looked down at her husband's face, then back at Spider-Man. "Please leave us now. There is much I must say to my husband before . . ."

The Web-slinger stepped to the window and pulled it open. “Yeah, I can dig it.” He placed a foot on the sill, then stopped, turning to face the tall, handsome woman. “I meant what I said at the hospital the other day, Vanessa. You’re one hell of a woman.”

Then he leaped out the window and vanished from sight.

Seconds later, the Kingpin’s eyes opened and he looked up into the anxious face of his wife, speaking her name softly through cracked lips.

“I am here, husband.”

“I am so sorry, my love. I have failed you.”

“It did not have to be so,” she whispered, gently stroking his bruised cheek.

“No, it did not. But Silvermane and Spider-Man . . .”

“They are not the ones who must bear the guilt, husband. They are not the ones who lied to me.”

The fat man sat up, a pained expression on his battered face. “You know?” he whispered.

“I know.” She nodded sadly. “I found out you were leading an attack on this place and I followed you, husband. I heard what you told Spider-Man.”

“I did it for *you,* Vanessa. I did it so that we would have the chance to begin our lives all over again.” He shook his head. “We could not do that without money.”

“You fool,” she cried. “Is that the only reason you think I have stood by your side all these years? For *money?”*

“No, my love. No! But how could I ask you to leave all the wealth we had accumulated here for a life of poverty, obscurity, in some remote corner of the world?”

“Oh, husband, husband,” Vanessa laughed bitterly, “for a man who professes to be so wise, there are so many things that you are ignorant about.” The woman rose to her feet. “I would have stood by you if we had nothing. The wealth has never mattered to me, not as long as I had your love.”

“Always,” he whispered.

“But it is over, nevertheless, husband.”

The Kingpin rose unsteadily and grasped his wife by the shoulders. “W-what are you saying, Vanessa?”

“I am saying that our life together has come to an end.” She pulled free of his grasp and walked to the window. She could see the first police car, its red light flashing, screeching to a halt in front of the house. She watched as three officers, guns in their hands, jumped

from the car. “I have pleaded with you for years to forsake this loathsome career, but time and time again you have returned to it, each time your excuses growing less and less convincing.

“But it was not until today that I realized you could never give up the power and the wealth that come with being the Kingpin of crime. It has become a part of you, husband, and it is that part of your soul that I can no longer live with.”

“Vanessa, I . . .” he started to say, his deep voice cracking.

Vanessa turned her tear-streaked face to him. “Please do not say anything, husband. There is nothing that can make any difference.”

She walked to the door, head held high, not looking back at the man she had spent her life with, the man she loved perhaps more than that life itself. She could not bear to see him.

“Vanessa.”

She stopped by the door. “Yes ?”

“I love you, Vanessa. I shall always love you, my darling,” the man whispered, his head bowed.

“And I you, my love.”

She ran from the room and out of his life.

Forever.

And nothing else mattered very much after that.

Twenty-Five

It was a greatly invigorated Peter Parker who awoke the next day after almost twenty-four straight hours of beautiful, uninterrupted sleep. He stood under a hot shower for a long time, letting the hot water wash away the last ache from his body, then put on his bathrobe and a sling for his still painful shoulder and sat down with a cup of coffee to catch the evening news on WNYC-T.V.

The television screen lit up, showing video-taped highlights from last night's police raid on Silvermane's Westchester mansion. Cops were loading the two dozen hired guns from both mobs into separate paddy wagons.

". . . arrested the members of the city's infamous Kingpin and Silvermane gangs. Police believe that both criminal organizations have been completely wiped out, thanks to these arrests."

Peter smiled and sipped his coffee. *Not bad for a day's work, Spidey.*

The scene on the T.V. screen changed, showing three cops leading a handcuffed Kingpin to a waiting patrol car. Reporters were shoving microphones into the big man's face, shouting questions at him, but the Kingpin said nothing, did not even take his hooded eyes from the ground under his feet as he docilely allowed the police to lead him to the car. "Also arrested," the voice-over commentary continued, "was the so-called Kingpin himself, leader of one of the routed gangs. Westchester County D.A. Sidney Fredericks said he was seeking

charges of murder in the first degree against the crime boss for the slaying of his rival, Silvermane."

The tape shifted again to Silvermane's study, where two ambulance attendants were carrying a stretcher covered by a white sheet from the entrance to the tunnel. "Silvermane was reportedly slain by the Kingpin in a showdown in the former's hidden arsenal."

Ian Forester and a woman, who Peter assumed was the man's wife, stood before the blazing lights of a press conference with their daughter between them. Forester was saying, ". . . of course, I am withdrawing from the mayoral primary now that my daughter has been safely returned to me." The veteran newsman looked into the televison camera, his expression tired but smiling. "And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the man responsible for saving her from the Kingpin's clutches, ladies and gentlemen. Spider-Man, if you're listening, I'd like you to know you have my family's deepest gratitude for what you've done for us. Thank you, and God bless you."

The scene shifted back to the studio and anchorman Ned Armitage. "Manhattan District Attorney Lottie Blumenfeld said her office was investigating the possibility of bringing charges of kidnapping and extortion, as well as the Westchester charge of murder, against the captured Kingpin."

Peter Parker smiled in satisfaction and reached for the knob to shut off his set when a picture of J. Jonah Jameson flashed on the chromo-key behind Armitage. "And in a somewhat related story, another candidate in the upcoming mayoral primary was disqualified today by the Board of Elections when it was discovered there were 'irregularities in his petitions to be placed on the ballot.' Sources at the Board say many of the signatures filed by the *Daily Bugle's* editor and publisher were questionable, perhaps fraudulent.

"Jameson issued a statement saying, quote: 'You can't get good help these days,' unquote. Nobody's quite sure what the former candidate meant by that."

Peter howled with laughter as he shut off the television. *Jameson, you old crow!*

There was a knock at his door and, still laughing, he opened it to find Cindy Sayers standing there, looking contrite. "Cindy!"

"Hello, Peter," she said softly. "May I come in?"

He held open the door. "Sure," he said. "Come in." *Oh, boy! I've been so wrapped up in this Kingpin/Silvermane mess that I completely forgot about the Cindy Sayers/J.J. Jameson mess!*

"Er . . . can I get you some coffee, Cindy?"

She shook her head, unable to look into his face. "No. No thanks,

Peter. I . . . I just came to explain a few things to you before I said good-bye."

He stared at her. "What!?"

"I've been lying to you, Peter. I think once I tell you the truth, you're going to want me to leave you alone. For good."

"Lying? Cindy, what're you . . . ?"

"I'm not Jameson's niece, Peter!" she blurted out.

"I know that."

"You *know?"*

He nodded. "Yeah. Robbie Robertson told me Jolly Jonah was an only child, *ipso facto,* he couldn't have a niece."

"Right."

"Then if you're not Jameson's niece, why was he so hot to have you work with me?"

"Because," she said, staring at the floor, a miserable look on her pretty face, "because I'm a private detective, Peter."

Peter stiffened, staring in amazement at her. *A detective!? Then Jameson does suspect I'm Spider-Man* . . . "That's a pretty low trick, lady," he said angrily. "What the hell does Jameson expect to find out by having *me* tailed by a detective?"

"I don't blame you for being angry, Pete."

"Damned right! Come on, I'm waiting for an explanation!"

Cindy bit her lip. "It's got to do with Spider-Man, Peter."

Steady, boy!

"Jameson hired me to tag around with you and find out how you manage to get all those exclusive pictures of Spider-Man in action."

You're kidding?

"You're kidding," he said incredulously.

She shook her head miserably. "I wish I were, Peter."

"But *why,* for cryin' out loud? Jameson gets all the shots of Spidey he can use from me. What'd he think, I was going to work for another newspaper or something?"

Cindy shrugged. "I guess it's no secret Jameson doesn't like you very much, Peter. He said he could get rid of you if he knew how you got your pictures and assign Spider-Man to one of his staff photographers. They work a lot cheaper than you do, I guess."

"That old buzzard. It'd serve him right if I *did* go over to another paper . . ." He stopped and looked at her, puzzled. "Hey, how come you're telling me all this? Doesn't that kind of blow your cover, as I believe they call it in the private-eye game?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Cindy said as she put her hand on the doorknob to leave. "I told Jameson this morning that I quit. I-I coudn't bring myself to do this to you anymore, Peter." She opened the door as her eyes filled with tears. "But before I walked out of your life forever, I had to come and explain, apologize for what I did. Good-bye, Peter." She ran from his apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Peter stared at the blank door for several moments after she was gone. *Damn her and damn Jameson!* He brought his fist down on the top of a metal bookcase, smashing his hand-through the thin metal. *How could she do this to me, after all we meant to each other!? First I lose Mary Jane, then Betty, and now Cindy! But the others, they never betrayed me like Cindy did! They never took money to be my girl, never lied to me like this!*

He went to the window and stared out into the street below. He saw Cindy run from the building and stop, looking both ways up and down the street. Then she sat down on the front stoop and buried her face in her hands. The anger on Peter's face crumpled as he watched her hunched shoulders heave with her sobs. *Oh, Lord! Cindy!*

Peter turned and ran from his apartment, leaping down the length of the stairs in a single jump. He raced through the lobby and yanked open the vestibule door.

"Cindy!"

The girl turned, tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked into Peter's face and saw his smile as he sat on the stoop next to her.

"I'm sorry, Cindy," he said softly, touching her hair gently with his fingers.

She sniffed. "Why? I'm the one who should be sorry."

"I'm sorry you're crying."

"I'm not."

"Hey, come on, pretty lady! So you made a teensy little mistake. Big deal! Nobody's perfect, you know!" He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him, kissing her salty lips gently as he stroked her shoulder. "Not even me. In fact, the only thing I've done right all day is realizing that I love you, lady."

A smile broke slowly through her tears. "You . . . ?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, Peter!"

Cindy Sayers threw her arms around Peter Parker's neck and hugged him as she would never be able to hug him again. "I love you, too," she whispered into his ear. "What do you think of that?"

Peter smiled. "I think, Louie, that this is the beginning of a beautiful

friendship.”